真・天地無用！魎皇鬼外伝

天地無用！GXP 8

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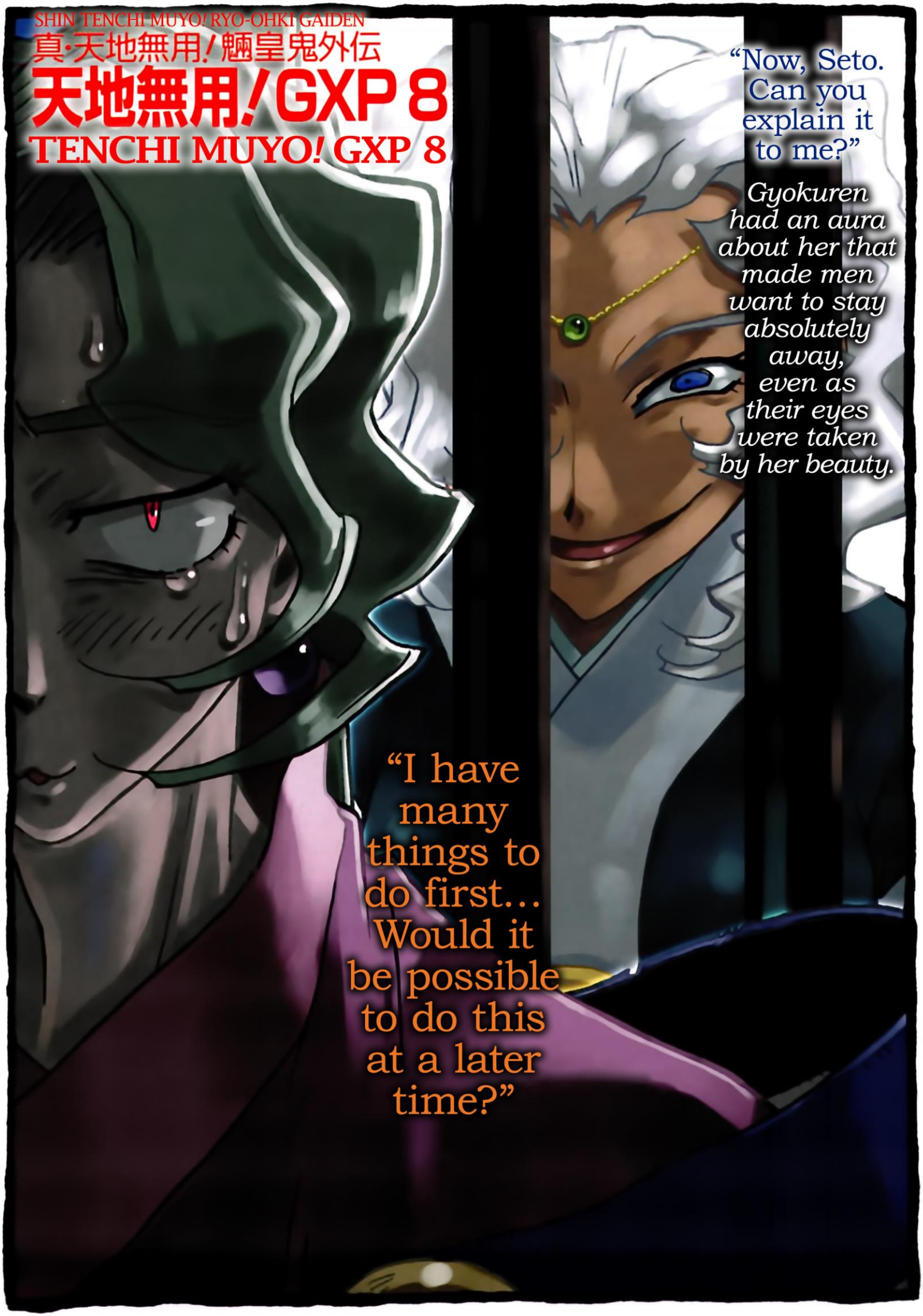
TENCHI MUYO! GXP 8


"Now, Seto. Can you explain it to me?"
Gyokuren had an aura about her that made men want to stay absolutely away, even as their eyes were taken by her beauty.
"I have many things to do first... Would it be possible to do this at a later time?"

Amane and the others had created some shade with several parasols, and they were sprawled lazily underneath them.
Amane, in particular, turned over every now and then, as she waited for the moment that Seina would look her way.
Then she would pretend to adjust her bathing suit and move in ways to accentuate her breasts.
And then she enjoyed the sight of Seina averting his eyes in embarrassment, and Neju becoming furious in an instant.

Kiriko and the others took off all of their clothes and entered the long-distance teleportation gate once again.
However…
Beeeeep!!
The weight limit alarm went off again, unsympathetically.

True Tenchi Muyo! Ryo-Ohki Gaiden

Tenchi Muyo! GXP8

Kajishima Masaki

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Chapter One: My First Errand: The Return

That morning, the Masaki household woke up to an atmosphere that was different from usual, one filled with restlessness and excitement. It was just like the morning of a festival, or a spring day when young trees were beginning to bud; joyful smiles lit up every face as everyone went about their respective morning chores.

Meanwhile, in the kitchen, something rather unusual was taking place.

Even Washu, who usually holed up in her lab, was helping to prepare breakfast alongside Sasami with a cheerful expression.

“Hm, hum-hum~♪”

Though the title of the tune was unclear, Washu was humming cheerfully as she skillfully filleted a fish.

“Washu-nee-chan… where did you get that fish?” Sasami asked, looking strangely anxious.

“Huh? It's a fish farmed from the pond we always eat from.” Washu looked at Sasami curiously.

The fish in her hands was, just as Washu said, a familiar fish resembling the trout that Sasami always filleted herself.

“Ah... y-yeah, that’s right. Hahahaha.” Sasami quickly looked away from Washu and began to immerse herself in her work as if trying to escape from something.

“Hehe. You’re so funny, Sasami-chan.” Washu smiled warmly and continued filleting the fish, but then she suddenly realized that the tool she was using was a surgical scalpel.

“Oh, I see.”

If Washu was using a surgical scalpel, it was only natural to be a little curious about the nature of the item. Of course, the scalpel had been thoroughly cleaned and sterilized, so it wasn’t as if she’d just finished dissecting some suspicious specimen, but Sasami was the master of this kitchen. If she felt something was off, Washu should have sensed it.

“……Hmm. I should use the right tool for the job.” Washu said and gave the surgical scalpel a quick rinse, tucked it away in her sleeve, pulled a small deboning knife from the knife block near the sink, and stared at its blade.

“Hmm.” Satisfied with the work of a first-rate craftsman and Sasami’s superb sharpening, Washu began filleting the fish once more.

(……Phew)

Relieved that Washu’s somewhat eerie aura from earlier had vanished, Sasami let out a small sigh in her heart.

“Sasami-chan, the third field in the east side looked good, so I picked some.”

Just then, Tenchi returned carrying a basket full of freshly picked carrots. As if to dispel the unpleasant sense of oppression, Sasami rushed over to Tenchi and peered into the basket.

“Really! They smell sweet and wonderful. Ryo-chan will be so happy.” Sasami said happily as she Inhaled the fresh scent of the carrots.

The jubilant atmosphere in the Masaki household was due to a report from Noike, Ryo-Ohki’s monitor, that they had entered the solar system. It wasn’t just Ryo-Ohki who had been feeling lonely. The members of the Masaki family had been feeling the same way.

“Well then, let’s give it one last push.” Washu said as she finished filleting the fish.

“You’re right. We have to get breakfast ready before Ryo-chan comes back.”

“I’ll go wash the carrots, then.”

Led by Washu, Sasami and Tenchi began carrying out their usual tasks.

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An hour later, Tenchi and the others sat silently around the table, staring intently at the breakfast laid out before them.

“Ryo-chan’s late.” Sasami muttered into the silence with a troubled look, and just as if a bolt of lightning had turned the steam into raindrops, words of anxiety and dissatisfaction began to pour out from everyone present.

“Seriously, where on earth has she wandered off to?” Ryoko sprawled out on her back, deflating like a balloon.

“Don’t tell me she got lost again?”

“Getting lost in the solar system on the way back from Jurai? Come on, there’s no way that’s happening.” Ryoko waved her hand dismissively at Aeka, who looked worried.

“But… maybe she ran into some kind of trouble…”

“Ryoko, do you know where Ryo-chan is?” At Mihoshi’s words, Sasami sat up, looking anxious, and stared at Ryoko’s face.

“The link to the ship’s been cut off. Ask Washu.” Ryoko said with an air of exasperation and let out a big yawn.

“Oh dear, what a troublesome child… We’ve got a transmission from Noike-dono.” Washu said as she activated a large monitor so everyone could see

“!?”

Everyone present watched the monitor with anxious and tense expressions, but the tension eased when Noike's wry smile appeared on screen. Ryoko, who had been making all sorts of

sarcastic remarks, felt the same way.

“I’m sorry, Washu-sama. You instructed me to stay out of sight as much as possible until we returned to Earth, but…”

“You’ve been through a lot. So, what happened?”

“Yes. When Ryo-chan entered the solar system…” As she spoke, a new window opened on the monitor, displaying a faint, membrane-like object.

“Oh, an Amorpho. It's rare to see one so close to the solar system.”

“Washu-sama. Isn’t the Amorpho known as the ‘Butterfly of the Universe’?”

“The ‘Butterfly of the Universe’?” Tenchi asked, intrigued by Aeka’s question, as he stared intently at the monitor.

“They’re colonies of microscopic filamentous organisms that feed on trace amounts of interstellar matter and energy. Occasionally, when they come near a star and absorb a massive amount of energy, they look like that, which is why they’re called ‘Butterflies.’”

“Huh… butterflies, you say.” Tenchi muttered, his expression tinged with a mix of complex emotions.

In the past, whenever Ryo-Ohki started chasing butterflies, she’d get so absorbed that she wouldn’t notice her surroundings, falling into rivers, tumbling off cliffs, or even darting into traffic, often putting herself in situations where an ordinary child would likely suffer serious injury. Of course, Ryo-Ohki, Washu’s masterpiece, wasn’t going to get hurt by something like that. , No, actually, if she’d suffered a painful lesson, she might have learned her lesson, but since Ryo-Ohki never even got a scratch, she kept chasing butterflies without realizing how dangerous it was.

While those in the know might not mind, the road near the Masaki family’s home was used by people driving through or visiting Masaki village on business. If those people saw Ryo-Ohki’s behavior, let alone if they hit her as she darted out into the street, it would cause a huge commotion. And if she calmly chased butterflies while meowing, it would be practically a horror movie.

That’s why the Masaki family had issued a “No Butterfly Chasing” order to Ryo-Ohki and reminded her of it whenever the opportunity arose. And recently, Ryo-Ohki had actually started to understand what it meant…

“Hah, sorry about that. She’s just a kid who doesn’t learn from her mistakes… Well, I think she just let her guard down because she felt safe, knowing we’re almost home.”

For Ryo-Ohki, who had traveled through interstellar space, the solar system was practically her own backyard.

“But Noike-dono, that wasn't the only reason you were detained, was it?”

“Huh??”

“Even the smallest Amorpho swarms are hundreds of kilometers in size, after all…” Washu said with a wry smile to Tenchi and the others, who looked puzzled.

“Are they really that big!?”

“The largest recorded swarm was thirty light-years across, found outside our galaxy, so getting close to one wouldn’t be all that interesting. Besides, since they can barely move on their own, it wouldn’t be nearly as exciting as chasing butterflies.”

“Just as Washu-sama said, it seemed like she lost interest right away and headed back toward Earth, but maybe because the tension had eased… this time, she seems to have taken an interest in other planetary systems…”

“This solar system is quite interesting, after all… So?”

“...We were detained because she was trying to play around by breaking up Saturn’s rings.”

“Hmm! Nice call!” As Washu gave a sharp thumbs-up, Tenchi and the others were clutched their heads in despair.

“It's probably because Ryoko-san scribbled on Chobimaru before.” Aeka glared coldly at Ryoko.

Previously, after getting drunk, Ryoko had used Ryo-Ohki’s Gungnir to riddle the planet-sized warship “Chobimaru”, commanded by Mihoshi’s younger brother, Misao, with holes and scrawled graffiti the size of a continent across its outer armor.

“Are you saying it's my fault?!”

“Little kids copy everything right away! As both her partner and her big sister, you especially need to be careful to set a good example.”

“Yeah, yeah. But I’m going to throw that right back at you.”

“Huh?”

“Why is Sasami here?”

“Oh…”

Even Aeka was left speechless by Ryoko’s brilliant retort. Sasami had secretly followed Aeka out of concern after she ran away from home. While the situation was slightly different from Ryoko’s, it was the same in that it resulted from her older sister’s careless actions.

“...You’re right. Well, let’s just agree to be more careful from now on.”

“Yeah.”

“Ryoko and Aeka-dono’s arguments have really matured, haven’t they?”

In the past, the two would have simply vented their frustration at each other, but now, through Sasami and Ryo-Ohki, Ryoko and Aeka were beginning to accept each other.

“Heh. Well then, we’ll be heading back now. Estimated time of arrival is thirty minutes from now.” Noike decided that it would be better to return to Earth and include Ryo-Ohki in their friendly conversation, so she simply said that and ended the call.

Exactly thirty minutes later, just as Noike had said, Ryo-Ohki descended from above the Masaki residence, escorted by Noike’s ship, Kyoko.

“Ryo-Ohki-cha~~~n!” Sasami stepped a few paces forward from the welcoming crowd and waved her arms wide toward the sky.

First, Ryo-Ohki descended into the pond in front of the Masaki residence, then Kyoko vanished into subspace through the gate on the pond’s surface.

“Myaa! Myaa!”

Ryo-Ohki, led by Noike, emerged from a small gate that appeared just as Kyoko vanished. But the moment Ryo-Ohki saw Sasami, Tenchi, and the others, her cheerful expression suddenly crumbled.

“Mya! ……Mya~~~~~n”

With tears welling up in her eyes, Ryo-Ohki, as Noike’s grip loosened, wobbled over with clumsy steps and threw herself into Sasami’s arms.

“Welcome home… Ryo-chan.”

Feeling the sensation of tiny fingers digging into her skin almost painfully and legs wrapped around her torso, Sasami happily hugged Ryo-Ohki with a strength that was almost rough.

“Mii”

As if responding to Sasami’s tight embrace, Ryo-Ohki clung to her even tighter. She wasn’t crying hysterically; she was simply soaking in Sasami’s warmth, as if to fill a gaping void. But that alone wasn’t enough to satisfy Ryo-Ohki’s hunger for companionship.

“Mii! Mii! Mii! Mii!”

One after another, she hugged Tenchi, Ryoko, Aeka, Mihoshi, and Washu, who had gathered around Sasami, and were stroking her head.

“Myan! Myan!”

By the time she hugged Washu, a smile had returned to Ryo-Ohki’s face, and by the time she finally hugged Noike, she was in high spirits. Finally satisfied, Ryo-Ohki was led by the hand by Sasami to the table for a slightly late breakfast.

Ryo-Ohki began to devour the Masaki family breakfast, her first in a long time. Of course, even on Jurai, she was served many delicacies from the mountains and seas, and the basic cooking methods were the same as Sasami’s and Noike’s, so the flavors were familiar to Ryo-Ohki. Moreover, the ingredients and chefs on Jurai were all top-notch. However, there was just one thing: when it came to carrots, Ryo-Ohki’s absolute favorite, the ones Tenchi grew were the best.

The carrots, cultivated by Washu through soil and variety improvements and carefully grown by Tenchi, were not only superior to those from the fields reserved for the Juraian royal family, but had also been specifically bred to suit Ryo-Ohki’s tastes. Furthermore, the carrots now laid out on the table were top-quality specimens, carefully selected from the very best plots among all the fields.

“Myan! Myaa, myaan!”

Taking a breather, Ryo-Ohki began recounting the stories from her journey over the past few days.

Her first solo space journey. The anticipation, anxiety, and fear, coupled with a strong sense of duty to deliver her younger sister safely. Under intense pressure, she arrived safely on Jurai, where she was greeted with a warm welcome amidst a sense of relief.

“Myaow~~~n”

Ryo-Ohki’s story gradually gained momentum, and with the carrot she was clutching serving as a makeshift microphone, her speech took on a pace that perfectly fit the description of “machine-gun talk.” Occasionally, she would take a bite out of the carrot she was holding, becoming entranced by its deliciousness, all while continuing to speak enthusiastically, accompanied by lively gestures.

Among all the travel stories, Ryo-Ohki spoke with particular enthusiasm and joy about her time with Seina and his crew. It was enough to make even Ryoko and Sasami feel a twinge of jealousy. She recounted everything in minute detail, from the activation of her Gungnir to their farewell, and those stories made up the bulk of her travel narrative.

“If you think of it as Ryo-Ohki sending that girl off to her future husband, I suppose that’s a relief for now.”

Ryoko and the others, who had looked a bit conflicted, agreed with Washu’s words.

“Well… what should we do now?”

Ryo-Ohki’s impassioned speech ended just past noon.

“Hmm… Well, let’s have an early snack, just a light meal.” Noike said while exchanging a glance with Sasami, in response to Tenchi’s question

Then, as if seeking their approval, she looked around at everyone present.

“Alright, then.”

After confirming there were no objections, Noike cleared away the teapot and cups and headed for the kitchen.

“Well then, I’ll be in the fields.”

“Myan!”

Upon hearing “the fields,” Ryo-Ohki shifted into her cabbit form as usual and hopped onto Tenchi’s shoulder. Tenchi was worried about Ryo-Ohki, who had just returned from a long journey, and was about to tell her to relax at home, but (……Well, if she gets tired, she can just take a nap in the shade of a tree.)

With that in mind, he headed toward the back door with Ryo-Ohki still perched on his shoulder.

“Myan, myan!”

As usual, on the way to the fields, Ryo-Ohki walked ahead of Tenchi, stopping here and there to explore. Tenchi watched the scene with a smile, feeling that their usual daily life had returned.

“Still… Seina-kun must be having a tough time as usual,” Tenchi stopped, looked up, and gazed at the sky.

“Myaa?”

Ryo-Ohki noticed Tenchi suddenly stopped and looked at him with a slightly puzzled expression. And perhaps feeling a little uneasy about Tenchi continuing to stare at the sky, “Myaa!” She meowed a little louder.

“Hm? Oh, sorry. I was just thinking about Seina-kun.”

“Myaa…”

Ryo-Ohki ran over to Tenchi, hopped onto his shoulder, and looked up in the same direction Tenchi was looking.

“I wonder what he’s doing right now?” Tenchi murmured, feeling the ticklish sensation of the wind ruffling Ryo-Ohki’s ears.

Chapter Two: Back to Square One

Seina's new Kamidake was still on Jurai. To be precise, although it was emitting high-energy vapor, it was still inside the adjustment chamber.

Using Seina's body as the biological key, he was the only one who had been sent through the transfer gate. However, since Minaho had told him about this beforehand, Seina wasn't particularly flustered as he looked around.

"So this is the bridge..."

It was dim inside and he could barely make out the structure that must be the center of the bridge, an egg-shaped unit on the pentagonal table was glowing faintly. However, that single light source was extremely dim, barely illuminating the central floor area and the stairs leading up to it.

"Is this the switch?"

Seina tried to carefully descend the stairs while being careful, but he missed the first step. Fortunately, the drop to the floor was only about a meter, so he only suffered a few minor scrapes. He immediately got back up and made his way toward the central table.

"...There's no way I'll get electrocuted out of nowhere, right?"

The faint glow from that egg-shaped unit reminded him of the discharge spheres used in electrical experiments, the kind with a metal sphere inside the glass that discharged when the glass was touched.

Seina put on his gloves and cautiously reached out his hand. But even as he brought his hand within a hair's breadth of it , nothing seemed to happen. Relieved, he removed his gloves and placed his hand on the unit.

"Seina-chan!"

The moment Seina placed his hand on it, lights flashed on the bridge, and Kiriko and the others were transferred in.

"Elma, NB. Prepare for launch immediately!"

Without even glancing around the bridge, Kiriko walked straight to the central table and placed her hand on the authentication plate there. Instantly, Kiriko's body was scanned, and a force-field chair materialized. She immediately began checking the monitors and keyboard that had just powered up.

But...

"W-what is this?! None of the necessary programs are installed!" Kiriko shouted in a voice that echoed through the Kamidake's bridge.

"You're right… but why? The ship's life support and environmental systems seem to be

working fine, though."

"Elma, how are you doing?"

"Nothing here either… I can't find any data that looks like a manual." Elma looked up, looking somewhat bewildered.

"What's going on?"

"Well, as you heard, it's a system malfunction. But… that kind of trouble isn't my area of expertise, so I'll have to leave it to the experts. More importantly…" Amane said, she shrugged at the anxious-looking Seina then looked up at the ceiling.

Seina glanced at Kiriko, decided he wasn't likely to be called upon, and followed Amane's gaze.

"This is an unusual bridge... though I haven't been in space for very long, so I don't really know much about it... I guess it's like a mineral version of an Imperial Ship?"

"Well, that's the most accurate description. I think this ship is definitely the type that anchors its facilities within several subspaces."

The Kamidake's bridge was mostly made of stone and crystalline materials, and its overall shape resembled a pentagonal pyramid. However, that structure applied only to the floor and the massive monitor plates; what could be seen through the gaps was the view outside. While it was wider than the bridge of the previous Kamidake, what was most overwhelming was its height up to the ceiling.

"About thirty meters, I'd say. But it's a strange balance, isn't it? Is it just for decoration?"

Even if that was a monitor plate up there, it was visually too high. They have to look up quite a bit.

"Seina-kun, Amane-san. I think that's probably a movable plate. I suspect the shape of the bridge can be adjusted depending on the situation." Elma said, seemingly unable to bear watching the two of them looking up so hard they looked like they might fall over.

"Ah, I see."

"Still, what's with there not even being a manual? I feel like we've been saddled with something outrageous. Why don't we ask Seto-sama what's going on for now?"

"You're right."

As Kiriko nodded in agreement with Amane's words, calls to the Mikagami Bridge were already being made.

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"Seto-sama… The plan was for her to be born once Seina-kun boarded the ship, right?" Minaho appeared on the monitor, her head tilted as she looked at Kamidake.

“There’s no way Washu-chan would make a mistake… but then again, we’re dealing with Seina-dono, aren’t we? Well, I suppose things like this happen.”

“Seto-sama, it’s Kiriko-chan.” An operator said and looked at Seto.

When Seto gave a slight nod, Kiriko’s image appeared on the monitor.

“We’re aware of the situation here as well. I’ll contact Earth immediately, but we don’t have much time regarding Neeju-dono either.”

“Even so, if the ship won’t move…”

“We have just the right data. The data from the previous Kamidake, that is.”

“From Kamidake Unit 1!?”

“That might actually be the right answer. Either way, we’ll need the data we’ve accumulated for dealing with Seina-dono.”

“Understood.”

Next to the monitor where the connection had dropped, Minaho was glaring at Seto with a reproachful look.

“Isn't it rather tasteless to spoil a surprise?”

“That’s true, but what if something were to happen to that girl as well as Seina-kun...”

“A child created by the legendary philosopher Hakubi Washu isn’t so fragile that something like that could take her down. In any case, if she were to be defeated by such a minor setback, she wouldn’t be fit to be Seina-kun’s partner.”

“...Understood. Then I’ll take Hakuren and the others with me. It seems they have something they want to say.”

Behind Minaho stood Hakuren and her group, staring intently at Seto with resentful expressions. Gyokuren’s aura, in particular, was anything but normal, and Minaho’s body trembled slightly, as if she might be stabbed at any moment.

“Sure, sure. I’ll listen to whatever you have to say.”

“Seto-sama, you really should cut back on assigning capable women to Seina-dono.” Kuisu Panta said as she appeared out of nowhere with a cheerful smile.

“Kiriko-chan, Gyokuren-chan, and Ringo-chan. It seems those three alone are already becoming too much to handle. Heh heh heh, you can’t count on Minaho-chan to stay on your side forever.”

“You’ve come at just the right time. I have some preparations to make. If possible, I’d like you to handle those girls…” Seto stopped herself from saying anything more when she saw Kuisu’s

smile.

“……That’s right. You’re on their side too, aren’t you?”

“Shall I prepare a cage? Heh, of course, the one for Seto-sama to go in.”

It was the same principle used when observing wild beasts or sharks up close.

“……”

After hearing Kuisu’s words, Seto thought for a moment, then said “Please make it a shelter class designed for large-scale combat,” with a serious expression.

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“Did you hear that, NB?”

“Checking database access permissions. It’ll be ready to download any minute now.”

“Storage space secured. Starting transfer.”

The moment Elma lightly pressed the switch, “……Wait, what!?” She let out a small cry.

“What's wrong? Is there a problem...?”

Kiriko, who had been about to stand up, froze in place, speechless, as a swirling dance of light suddenly appeared on the massive monitor plate that served as the inner wall.

“What’s happening? Is the system malfunctioning!?”

“No, I don’t think so! I don’t really understand it either, but it looks like it’s installing Kamidake’s data, linking the various data sets… and it seems to be running bug checks and verifying operational suitability as well.”

“You mean it looks like it's happening!?”

“The display speed is way too fast! It’s like fast-forwarding a two-hour movie in about five seconds… but it’s not a system crash!”

After about thirty seconds of flickering, the light ended just as abruptly as it had begun. The monitor screen displayed “Installation Complete” along with logs for each verification item.

“...No way...” Kiriko, who had been standing there in a daze, collapsed into her chair as if the paralysis had been lifted.

“It looks like the installation, full data recognition, and linking are all complete.”

“R-Really?”

“All necessary programs and data have been installed, and we’ve run bug checks on hundreds of millions of system configurations… plus created backups in the trillions.”

“Are… are you kidding me?”

Transferring data, especially to a fully operational state, took time, especially for a general-purpose ship, unless it was an exact replica of the original ship. Moreover, the new Kamidake was a custom-made ship built by Washu. Kiriko estimated that it would take six hours to complete, and that was even with Seto's subordinates providing backup.

“I’d really like to think you’re joking, though.”

“Could it be that the Kamidake’s data was already installed and just hidden?”

But Elma quietly shook her head at Kiriko’s words.

“I’d love to think that, too… Even if the purpose, scale, and rank are on a completely different level, it’s still the latest model built in Airi-han’s workshop. I can predict a certain degree of technical difference. …But this is just on a whole different level.” **(TN: Han is Kansai dialect for san.)**

“Kiriko-san, are you okay?” Seina said, concerned for Kiriko, whose forehead was covered in tiny beads of sweat.

“……I’m sorry. I feel like I’m a little tipsy.”

“What!?”

“It’s no wonder. You’ve just peered into the unfathomable abyss of the legendary Philosopher, after all.”

“The abyss, huh?”

“I mean, it’s like peering down from the top of a ridiculously high cliff with no railing, isn’t it?” Elma’s smile looked a little pained.

“It’s like someone who’s only ever known the width of this bridge suddenly seeing the universe. We were shown something so incredibly mind-blowing that even someone well-versed in this kind of technology would be quite shocked. Master went up into space and saw all kinds of incredible technology, didn’t he? But in Master’s time, there was the foundation of science fiction. But what if Master were a person from the Edo period or even earlier, an era where such technology couldn’t even be imagined?”

“I-I see... I think I get it.” Seina nodded with a confused look on his face.

“Well, since Kamidake's programs and data are compatible with Washu-sama's OS, the one officially adopted after that incident, it's definitely a good fit for this ship.”

“That’s just a small consolation, though. Really, the Academy… no, the technology the Philosophers are showing the public is just the tip of the iceberg.”

“Still, the question is how we interpret the fact that it was provided to us… Hmm? Hey, Amane! Elma and NB too!” Kiriko, who had been spacing out, realized something and

furrowed her brow.

“You put personal programs and data into Kamidake Unit 1!! I told you not to do anything that strange.”

“W-what do you mean, how did that…”

“It’s been properly blocked. As a suspicious program! …To leave something like this in the official backup data…”

“Well, Kamidake was running with that included, after all… Doesn’t that make it valuable data too?”

“Exactly. Besides, it says right here that it’s safe to use!”

“Oh, you're right. Is there anything else...?” Upon seeing that, Elma suddenly slumped her shoulders and collapsed face-down onto the keyboard and monitor.

“What?! What’s wrong, Elma!?”

“Ki-Kiriko-han... This looks more like a proofreading program than a diagnostic tool... Wait... Ugh, that's brutal.”

“Huh? …… W-what is this?”

Displayed there was a precise assessment of the issues with Elma’s program, the proposed changes, and an overall evaluation.

“Let’s try a little harder.”

The strangely gentle words of the final overall evaluation only served to deepen Elma’s sense of dejection.

“……To be honest, I was actually pretty confident in this one.”

“E-Elma-san?”

“……Well, I suppose from Washu-sama’s perspective, I’m still just a greenhorn.”

“I'm sorry to interrupt, but when do you think we'll be departing?” Neeju, who had been silently observing Seina and the crew until then, asked cheerfully.

Whether intentional or coincidental, it was the perfect moment to cut the conversation short.

“Ah, I’m so sorry. Things got a bit messy, but once we finish the final checks, we’ll be ready to launch immediately.”

“Good, that’s a relief.”

“Alright, everyone, take your positions. The console seems to be free, so for now, the captain will sit to my right, and Amane to his right.”

“So it’s the same setup as on the previous Kamidake. Still, facing each other like this feels a little strange, doesn’t it?”

Seina and Amane placed their hands on the console panel just as Kiriko had done.

“Alright. I’ll take this one.”

Without hesitation, Neeju touched the remaining console panel. Neeju’s body was scanned, and she sat down in a chair that shifted into a shape tailored to her.

“I wonder what I should do...”

“Why don’t you just sit on the table for now?”

“If this thing in the middle weren’t here, this spot would be perfect, though.” NB was circling around the central unit, sounding annoyed.

“What are you talking about? That’s an important part of the ship. You’re just the captain’s personal equipment, after all.”

“How can something as puny as this egg be more important than me...”

“NB! Stop hanging right in front of me!” Kiriko yelled in an irritated voice.

Since everyone was seated around the table, he was bound to catch her eye.

“Just stay still, or float around somewhere.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Judging that provoking Kiriko right now was dangerous, NB simply drifted off, floating up above the bridge as if to take in the sights.

“Orders received and confirmed. Initiating planning... Plan data creation complete.”

Planning that would normally take about an hour was done in an instant. Moreover, tens of thousands of plans were presented.

“...What should we do?” Elma looked at Kiriko with a puzzled expression.

“Display the optimal solution!!”

“That’s the one currently displayed.” Elma answered Kiriko, who looked slightly desperate, without a moment’s hesitation.

“……This is the second time I’ve seriously considered just handing in my resignation.” Kiriko murmured, looking as if she might burst into tears at any moment.

But she quickly pulled herself together and began reviewing the proposed plan.

“Hey, hey. If they’re all optimal solutions anyway, wouldn’t it be fine to just pick one at

random? We'll end up revising it anyway, just like always." Amane said, trying to calm Kiriko down.

If they were to properly check tens of thousands of plans, who knew how many months it would take.

"Y-yeah. You're right… So, Amane, please." Kiriko said as she took a deep breath to calm herself as she looked at Amane.

If anyone could pick the best one from such a large pool, it was Amane.

"Ah, but I was instructed to leave all decisions to the captain…"

"What!?"

At Elma's words, everyone gasped in unison.

"And we're not even allowed to engage in combat if we encounter pirates."

"Wait a minute!"

Unable to contain himself, Seina stood up. This was nothing less than an order to use Neeju as bait. However, in stark contrast to Seina, Neeju remained completely calm.

"You don't need to worry about me. I'm the one who asked for this."

"!!"

Seina was speechless at those words. Even Kiriko and the others, who had gained some experience, were visibly shaken. It wasn't the fact that they were using a young girl as bait, but rather that they were making Seina take on that role.

"What do you mean?"

"That's still a secret." Her tone was strangely mature, like an adult scolding a child.

Kiriko and the others began to feel uneasy about Neeju, struck by the expression in her eyes, one that didn't match her innocent appearance. But Seina was looking at Neeju with a serious expression.

"...Even though she's younger than my own little sister..."

"It's okay. Don't take it too seriously, big brother. I trust you, you managed to protect Seto-sama's shipment." Neeju smiled sweetly as she looked at Seina.

"You old ladies should do your best, too."

Unlike when she looked at Seina, the expression she directed at Kiriko held a hint of venom.

"!!!!!"

At that, blue veins popped out on Kiriko and the others' temples. Though her expression remained calm, the bridge seemed to freeze over in an instant.

"I'll do my best to live up to your expectations. …Well then, Captain, please handle the settings." Kiriko's tone was calm, but the atmosphere felt like it might explode at the slightest touch.

"Y-yes!"

Seina quickly focused on the task at hand and selected a plan. Based on years of experience, he knew that doing anything to irritate Kiriko even slightly in a situation like this was strictly forbidden. Using the plan Seina had chosen as a basis, everyone performed their final checks, and preparations for departure were complete one hour after Seina boarded the Kamidake.

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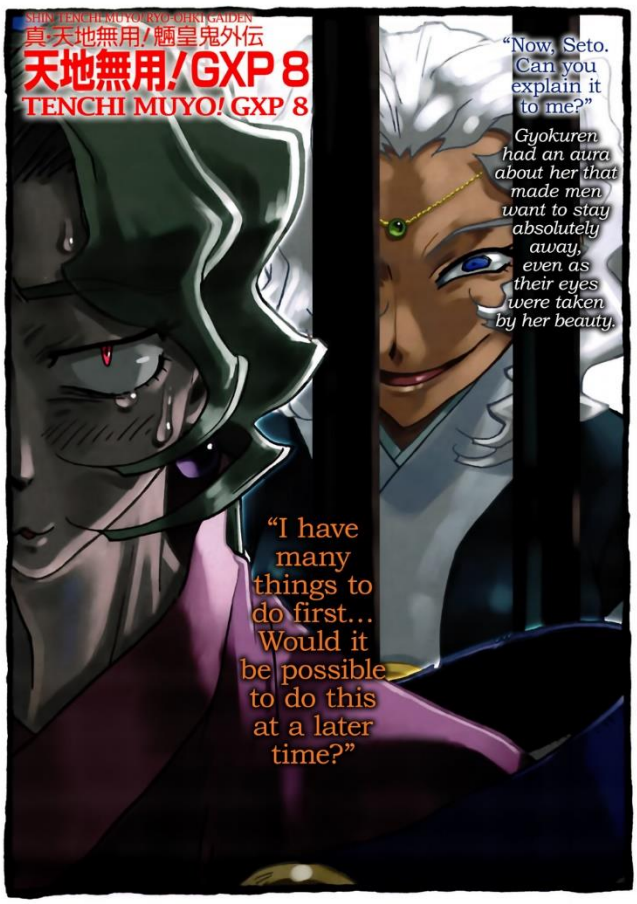
The monitors on Mikagami's bridge displayed the Kamidake ascending into the skies of Jurai.

"They managed to set sail safely, didn't we?"

"It's not going smoothly over here, though."


SHIN TENCHI MUYO! MYO-OHKI GAIDEN
真・天地無用!魎皇鬼外伝
天地無用!GXP 8
TENCHI MUYO! GXP 8
"Now, Seto. Can you explain it to me?"
Gyokuren had an aura about her that made men want to stay absolutely away, even as their eyes were taken by her beauty.
"I have many things to do first… Would it be possible to do this at a later time?"

Behind Minaho, who was calmly staring at the monitor, Seto, surrounded on all sides by Gyokuren and the others, grumbled with a sour expression.

"All we can do now is hope they complete their mission safely."

"Are you even listening?"

"……"

No matter what Seto said, Minaho has no intention of getting involved. Because...

"Well then, Seto-sama. Can you explain it to me?"

Gyokuren had an aura that made men want to absolutely stay away, even as their eyes were taken by her beauty.

"I have many things to do first… Would it be possible to this at a later time?"

"You're being stubborn!"

Perhaps the separation from Seina was taking a toll on her more than expected, as Karen,

uncharacteristically, was quite menacing. However, the same was true for the usually calm Hakuren and Suiren, who had difficulty showing her emotions.

“Oh my~~. That’s more effective than I imagined…” Seto looked at the four of them, then stopped abruptly on Suiren.

“……What’s wrong?”

Minaho had decided to stay out of it, but finding the situation suspicious, she spoke as calmly as possible, trying not to disrupt the atmosphere, just as she usually would.

“Well, you see. Suiren-chan… I can sense an unpleasant killing intent, but since she has no presence, I get anxious unless I can actually see her.”

“Even to the point of turning your back on Gyokuren?”

“When she’s projecting such a striking presence, I can sense even her smallest movements. Besides, blocking out visual information puts less pressure on me, ho ho ho ho…” Seto laughed in a dry, emotionless voice, the kind that made you think, “Is this what a mummy's laugh sounds like?”

“I'm not sure if you have the time or not... In any case, we're not getting anywhere like this, so wouldn't it be better if you gave them a more detailed explanation?”

“I have a few things I need to take care of before we head out.”

“But we can’t go anywhere like this.”

“You’re being naive. This cage not only keeps Gyokuren-chan and the others away…” As she spoke, Seto’s body began to glow.

“Is this a point-to-point teleportation gate!? I see, it’s to prevent Gyokuren-chan and the others from chasing after us!!”

With the abilities of Seto’s subordinates, investigating the destination of any gate was a piece of cake. However, for a point-to-point system independent of the main teleportation network, there was no way to investigate it unless you could access the gate itself.

“Analyze the teleportation trail! Predict the destination!” Gyokuren ordered the operator as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Normally, Mikagami’s resident operators outranked Gyokuren and her group; only Seto, Minaho, and the Sentinel Fleet Captain had the authority to give them orders. That said, they didn’t want to do anything as reckless as defying Gyokuren right now. Moreover, since Seto was clearly at fault no matter how you looked at it, not a single person would dare to defy Gyokuren. And there was another reason: not just Gyokuren, but the tone of their voices clearly belonged to those accustomed to giving orders.

“……”

But they were, after all, a group of seasoned veterans. Suppressing their instinctive reactions, they glanced sideways at Minaho's expression. And in the next instant, as if that were a signal, they all began working in unison. Knowing the situation, they were certain that none of their superiors, other than Seto, would criticize their actions.

"Candidate teleportation destinations: Thirty-four!"

"Pick out the high-priority items from the ongoing plans. Seto-sama, no, narrow it down based on the target's predicted movements!"

"Request backup from the 'Seto Victims' Association' too! They have staff specialized in analyzing the target's behavior patterns, and they have plenty of historical data."

"Heh heh heh. No matter where you run, I'll corner you for sure!"

As expected of Seto's subordinates. Their expressions, now revealing their true nature, that they didn't even regard their superior as a superior, were truly vibrant.

"If you lie with dogs, you'll get fleas… There was the saying, 'Children are mirrors; parents should reflect on their own paths'. It really shows how important our daily actions are."

Watching the operators' jubilant expressions, Minaho nodded thoughtfully.

Chapter Three: A Boxed Girl?

After leaving Planet Jurai's gravitational field, Kamidake performed a short-range jump as a test and materialized outside the Jurai solar system.

"No system malfunctions. No abnormalities detected on the hull either." Elma reported with a hint of mild disappointment on her face.

"What's wrong? Is there a problem?" Amane, who had keenly sensed Elma's mood, asked.

"Oh, no. It's just so ordinary that I'm a little let down. After all, this ship gave us quite a shock before we set sail."

"Well, I guess I was definitely expecting something... but in reality, we aren't doing anything special, after all."

"...I guess so. It's just a standard hyperspace jump, after all." Kiriko's expression seemed as if she were trying to convince herself of something.

"Hm? What's up, Kiriko? Is something bothering you?"

"Is something wrong?"

Following Amane, Seina also looked at Kiriko with concern.

“No, it’s nothing, Captain. Besides, I can’t keep getting startled every time you do something.”

“You’re right about that. Well, the stability in hyperspace is impressive. And if it weren’t for what happened before we left, I’d be pretty surprised by how little friction there is, too.”

“More importantly, since there are no abnormalities on the ship, I’d like to run the final program.”

As if to break the relaxed atmosphere, Kiriko looked at Seina. Seina nodded silently in response.

“Then, with the jump to our first destination, we’ll transition to our official mission. Captain, please provide the navigation instructions.”

“Roger.” With practiced ease, Seina set the course.

“Route set! Hyperspace jump, loading program!”

A moment later, Kamidake plunged back into hyperspace.

“Entering hyperspace. All systems normal. Jump-out is at 1806 shipboard time.”

“Guess we’ll adjust the time zone here… Speaking of which, how do the living quarters look?”

“Leave that to me! I’ve already checked it out.”

“Oh, good job! So you weren’t just floating around in there after all.”

“Ha ha ha! Praise me, praise me!” As expected, NB leaned back and laughed happily.

“...That wasn’t a compliment.” As expected, Seina retorted in a whisper.

But no matter how quiet he was, to NB’s ears, it was like he was shouting at the top of his lungs. Still, NB remained in high spirits, laughing away.

“It seems like as long as everyone’s attention is on him, that’s all that matters.”

Kiriko glanced at Seina with a wry smile. Her expression clearly showed that she had fully recovered from the shock she’d felt when they set out.

“It’s about time you told me about the residential district.”

“Oh, right, that’s true.”

NB descended from above and landed on the unit in the center of the table.

“Here we go!”

With a shout that sounded like an old man’s, he proudly climbed onto the unit. And the very next moment, “Aaaaaaargh!”

A spectacular electrical discharge erupted from the unit, and NB was blown away, falling onto the table and billowing white smoke.

“H-hey! Are you okay!?”

“W-what!? What!? What!? What the hell just happened???”

Shouting so loudly it drowned out Seina’s worried voice, NB flew around wildly, paying no attention to his surroundings.

“Calm down, NB!”

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“Hey, NB!!”

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa

“Look, if you keep dithering like this, Elma’s going to take your job away from you.”

“Ahh, Elma-han, wait! Wait a sec! I’ll be done in a minute, just wait a little longer!” **(TN: Damn Kansai dialect!)**

NB rubbed his still smoking rear end (?) against the table to extinguish it, then activated several monitors.

“This new Kamidake has several sub-spaces anchored besides the bridge. And they’re quite spacious, too. Judging from that, this ship’s energy generator must be something quite special. After all, even a GP-class battleship doesn’t have the power to anchor this many sub-spaces.”

“Huh.”

“NB, you’re getting off track.”

“……But I was just getting to the good part.”

“Elma, continue…”

“R-right! So, in that subspace, there are actually fifty rooms for senior officers, twenty for captains, plus a large dining hall, a kitchen capable of cooking for up to a thousand people, a huge gym, a pool, recreational facilities, medical equipment I’ve never seen before, it’s just incredible!”

“……This is…… amazing…… Seriously?”

Looking at the projected images of the facilities, Amane let out a sigh of admiration. They were on par with those of a mid-sized luxury cruise ship.

“With a ship like this, even if I quit the GP, I could make a living in the tourism industry.”

“It’s packed with so much stuff, it’s almost overwhelming. Plus, there’s a massive stockpile of necessary supplies. I can definitely see why NB would want to make a big deal out of this.”

“About eighty percent of the consumables are recyclable, so if it’s just for Master and this crew, you could probably operate almost entirely without resupply.”

“It really has everything, doesn't it?”

“If she didn’t go this far, I think something like what happened with Seto-han’s package the other day might have happened again, don’t you think?”

“That’s true.”

Amane, who came from a well-to-do background, was used to this sort of extravagant gift, so she accepted the reality without hesitation. However, the other members were still bewildered by it.

“……As Minaho-sama said, considering the number pirates that were arrested so far and the

incident with Seto-sama's package, I suppose this is acceptable."

"That's true. Compared to Washu-sama's brand-new ship, which is 'unprecedented', a little bonus like this is nothing."

Kiriko and Elma were desperately trying to subtly convince Seina, who was standing there with his mouth wide open in astonishment. However, even Kiriko and Elma themselves found it difficult to accept the truth. To be honest, a ship like this couldn't be acquired no matter how much money you offered. Even the super-rich couldn't afford it.

"Ultimately, the reason these kinds of ships are expensive is because of their rarity and other added value. Our clothes aren't that expensive if you only consider the cost of materials and labor."

Kiriko and Elma glared with resentment at Amane, who spoke nonchalantly.

"Compared to the retail price, right? Anyway, we're going to get busy from here on out, so just pick a room and get some rest."

"In that case, we have an interior design catalog, just pick whatever you like."

"Interior design catalog?"

"Of course. Every room is different, from the interior design to the floor plan."

"No way! I thought they were all the same standard model…"

"Well, technically they're all off-the-shelf models, I guess."

But the items in the catalog were all quite elaborate, and none of them looked like off-the-shelf products at all. Then, as Elma looked at the model numbers, her expression changed.

"These are all things designed by Washu-sama. They're all quite old designs... Wait, what? What? What the, ?!" Elma exclaimed as her expression shifted to one of utter astonishment

"Elma, what's wrong?"

"These are all antique masterpieces!" Elma leaned in so close to the monitor it was as if she were rubbing her face against it.

"What do you mean?"

"This unit was used in the early days of the GP, intended for high-ranking officers, battleship captains, and VIPs. But when the GP implemented a major standardization drive, it no longer met the new specifications and was scrapped. However, due to the excellence of its design and engineering, the used units that ended up on the market fetched quite high prices."

"Now that you mention it, there was something similar on my grandfather's ship…" Amane stared intently at the catalog.

“Ah, yes, that reminds me. My grandfather's hobby friends were talking about something with great enthusiasm, it must have been about the model number in this room.”

“But Elma, you sure know a lot about that.”

“Even among pirates, having this unit as your private quarters is considered a status symbol. I… well, Ryoko, actually… did a lot of research when I was building my own ship.”

“Ah, I see. That’s why you know so much about it.”

“Well, since it’s quite an old model, most of them have been lost in accidents or wars, or the interiors aren’t original anymore due to aging or damage… But this one is completely original, and in brand-new condition.”

With an expression that perfectly captured the word “salivating,” Elma stared intently at the monitor.

“There are so many, so many… This alone is worth a fortune.”

“By the way, the symbol at the end of every model number means ‘prototype,’ you know.”

“Prototypes? Could they be Washu-sama’s?”

“Just like the previous Kamidake, these are prototypes made before they were simplified for mass production, so they’re more intricately crafted than the ones on the market.”

“Wait, these are super rare!” Elma looked like she’s about to cry.

“But I guess for Washu-han, it probably just feels like she’s offloading some junk from her storage room.”

“If it's Washu-sama's junk, I'd be more than happy to take it!”

“NB, Elma! Let’s wrap up the trivia for now. Anyway, rest is the priority… Right, first, please let Neeju-sama choose a room.” Kiriko said and turned to Neeju.

“Then let Seina-nii-chan decide. We’re going to be living together anyway.”

“Huh!?”

Seina and the others, looking dumbfounded, all turned towards Neeju.

“If it’s about taking care of Neeju-sama, I’ll do it!”

“I heard that Seina-nii-chan is the one with the most free time on this ship, right? Seto-sama also said, ‘You should let your big brother take care of you’.”

“Ugh!”

Seina may be the captain, but he was merely a figurehead, appointed solely to grant the authority to set the course. In terms of his position, he wasn’t even a trainee captain, he was just a student in training. It wasn’t a problem when Hakuren and the others were here, but this time, they aren’t on board. With so few relief personnel, Seina has no choice but to handle all the little chores himself.

“But…”

“But?”

Faced with Neeju’s question, Kiriko and the others were at a loss for words.

(Neeju-sama is still a child, and I can’t imagine Seina-chan doing anything strange… but!)

Kiriko and the others felt a vague, hard-to-put-into-words unease regarding Neeju.

“But, since they’re of the opposite sex, there are various inconveniences…”

“No way! I want big brother! Hey, big brother, do you not want to?” Neeju suddenly adopted a childish tone and looked at Seina.

“That’s true. Kiriko-san and the others are busy, so I’ll take care of her.”

“C-Captain!?”

“It’s okay! I won’t be a bother to Seina-nii-chan.” With that, Neeju cut Kiriko off and clung to Seina’s arm.

“……Because I can do everything on my own now. ……All sorts of things, you know? ♡” Neeju smiled triumphantly at Kiriko and the other girls.

“Hey!”

Kiriko and the others were annoyed by Neeju’s smile, which could be interpreted as a declaration of war.

“Oooookay. This way, you two~” Speaking in a tone that sounded just like a tour guide, NB quickly led Seina and Neeju up the stairs.

“Sorry. Well, I’ll leave the rest to you.”

“Got it.”

Given the situation, they couldn’t afford to rub salt in the wound, so Kiriko and the others, though their faces were tight with tension, saw Seina and Neeju off with a forced smile.

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“If you choose a room you'd like to use, I can either teleport you directly, or you can take a walk on the pathway that serves as a promenade.”

As they climbed the stairs, NB opened a gate directly to the residential area. Immediately, the scent of plants and trees wafted through the air.

“Wow! It’s pretty spacious.”

Stepping out of the gate, a fairly large park spread out before them. Looking back, beyond the oval-shaped gate Seina and Neeju had emerged from, there was a circular pond that must have been about a hundred meters in diameter. Surrounding it was a park roughly a hundred meters wide. Along its outer perimeter stood the residences for senior officers, and further up the terraced slopes were the homes of the captain-class officers.

“It’s shaped like a huge hemisphere, isn’t it?” Neeju said cheerfully, tilting her head back so far she looked like she might fall over.

(If there were a World Tree in the center, it would look just like the living quarters on an Imperial Ship. Still… I can’t believe it.)

Of course, the scale was on a completely different level, but even so, Seina still couldn’t quite come to terms with the fact that a ship with such a space had become his.

“By the way, which room are you going to take?”

“Instead of that, why don’t we go for a little walk?”

“Yeah, that's fine. But aren't you tired?”

“I’m fine!” With that, Neeju set off running, looking delighted.

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“What do you think?”

Kiriko and the others watched on the monitor from the bridge as Neeju frolicked innocently and Seina followed behind her with a wry smile.

“They look like they’re having fun…”

“Amane!”

“I know. You’re trying to say that ‘Melmas’ refers to the planet Melmas ruled by that shrine maiden, right?”

“And ‘Neeju Na Melmas’ is the name of the shrine maiden who has reigned over Melmas for

about five hundred years."

"Especially since she's a mysterious shrine maiden who has never once revealed her appearance to the public and has never even left the planet Melmas."

"Is it her? A duplicate? Or an unrelated person using a pseudonym? And if so, what's her motive?"

"Judging by the navigation plan, it's definitely a clever diversionary tactic, so I think she's highly likely to be a duplicate… but the fact that she's traveling without any attendants just adds to the confusion, doesn't it?"

"A plot within a plot within a plot? Anyway, judging from her comment about old ladies and the way she charmed Seina, she's definitely no ordinary person."

"So, Amane-san, do you also think that remark was intentional?"

"She successfully won Seina over, helped the floundering Kiriko get back on her feet, and created a sense of tension among the crew. Her remarks at key moments were masterful, so it's definitely true that she's not acting her age."

"In that case, that last bit was a declaration of war. Though, I'm curious about her intentions…"

"I'm curious about who this person connected to Seto-sama is. Either way, it's definitely not just simple romantic feelings or childish possessiveness, though."

"The problem isn't the other person's motives, but the captain… Seina-chan… well…" Perhaps hesitating to use direct language, Kiriko trailed off.

Everyone there was about the same age and gender. There was no need to watch her words. However, the fact that it involved Seina made it difficult to speak.

"NB would stop her, right? After all, he does have the ethical guidelines installed."

"Even Airi-sama, as expected..."

"...Anyway, we have to figure out what Seto-sama's intentions are..." Kiriko, muttered with a weary expression, having regained some composure thanks to Amane and Elma's calmness.

"Ah, right. A girl boarded the ship with a man named Yamada Seina. And that ship just departed a little while ago."

In a pitch-black room, a man was communicating with an unknown party. From his attire alone, it was clear that he was Juraian.

"...So, this is the video data of the target. Are you sure it's the right one?"

"I don't need to tell you that! Just send the data already!" The other party seemed quite

irritated and raised his voice sharply.

The man shrugged slightly and flashed a mocking smile.

“This is data on the relay points where they’ll be stopping.”

“What about the route data?”

“The route isn’t set in advance. I guess they decide it on the spot each time.”

“Relay points don’t mean a thing! I want the route data! For God’s sake, what do you think I paid you all that money for?!!”

“Hey, hey, we’re dealing with ‘The Demon Princess of Jurai’ here. Even the data I just gave you is worth several times what you paid for it.”

“You bastard! How dare you speak to me like that!”

“Knowing the waypoints versus not knowing them makes a world of difference in terms of the range of possibilities. If you don’t have a forecaster on your end, try leaking that data to various parties.”

“……Hmph! I don’t need you to tell me that!” With that, the other party cut the connection.

Though his tone was unhappy, he was clearly elated by the man’s advice.

“I??”

Just as the other party cut off the communication, the room suddenly brightened.

“Oh, they noticed already?”

Seto, who was standing behind the man, looked up at the ceiling with a look of disbelief.

“If the person we were just talking to were as capable as those girls, they probably wouldn’t have fallen for a trick like this.”

The man transformed into Kuisu Panta.

“That planet’s future looks pretty bleak. Well, that works in our favor, though.”

“Now that we've finished scattering the chum, let's move on to the next thing.”

With that, Kuisu and Seto leapt through the next gate. Gyokuren and the others stormed into the room just a few seconds later.

“Hehe, ahaha!”

As if dancing, Neeju ran through the trees in the park. Then, taking off her shoes, she stepped

into the stream.

“Neeju-chan! Wait, whoa!!”

Seina, rushing over worriedly, nearly stepped on a small animal that suddenly darted out of the bushes. Trying to avoid it, he forced his foot to swerve, but ended up slipping on the moss and falling headfirst into the stream.

“Big brother, are you okay?”

“Haha, I’m fine. I’m used to this.”

Seina stood up, laughing, as Neeju rushed over, looking worried.

“Still, I can’t believe there are actually living creatures here.”

“They’ve even built a simple ecosystem to maintain the environment inside this space. It’s amazing.”

As Neeju looked around, she saw fish leaping from the central pond and small birds and insects flying through the air. Neeju stared at them silently. Seina remained quiet so as not to disturb her, waiting for Neeju to speak first.

“Hey, big brother.”

About ten minutes passed before Neeju spoke, her gaze still fixed on the scenery.

“Hm? What is it?”

“You know, I’m actually a boxed girl.”

“You do give off that ‘young lady from a good family’ vibe.”

“No, that’s not it. I mean I’m literally a ‘boxed girl’.”

“……Huh?”

“Taken out of the box only when needed, and put back in the box the rest of the time so I don’t get broken, dirty, or run away…”

“Neeju-chan?”

“Ah, but you know, even though I say ‘box,’ it’s actually a room about the same size as this space. It’s stocked with all sorts of luxuries and offerings. But…” With that, Neeju moved her feet, which were dipped in the stream, and gazed at the gently rippling water.

“There are no everyday necessities…… I’d never be allowed to do something like this.” Muttering that, Neeju looked at Seina and flashed a bright smile.

Just then, the air in the living quarters was suddenly enveloped in silence. It was just like when he first met Neeju, a mysterious atmosphere, as if this space had turned into a cathedral.

“So, is this the price I pay for stepping out of the box… no, perhaps the reward?” Neeju’s voice resonated like a solemn prayer.

“So… protect me.” Her tone felt less like a command and more like a divine revelation.

“I understand. I’ll do everything I can.” As Seina spoke, the silence shattered and sound returned to the space.

Birds took flight all at once, fish splashed against the water’s surface, it was as if the bells of a cathedral were ringing in unison.

“!!?”

For a moment, a look of surprise flashed across Neeju’s face. But Seina was distracted by the commotion and didn’t notice.

“Hey, big brother, let’s head home soon.”

Once the commotion had died down, Neeju took Seina’s hand.

“Are you done already?”

“Yeah. I've already picked out which house I want. NB, show us the way.”

“Okay. Follow me.”

As NB started moving, Neeju followed behind, almost dragging Seina along.

“Bis brother, have you ever held hands with your little sister?” Noticing Seina’s awkwardness, Neeju looked up at him and asked curiously.

“Huh? Oh… yeah. You know I’m unlucky, right?”

“Yes, from Seto-sama. She said there was a bias in your probabilities.”

“Right, you see, I didn’t want Yoshiko to get into any danger, so I tried not to get too close to her.”

“It’s too bad she couldn’t play with her big brother.”

“She was lonely at first… but once she started kindergarten and made friends in the neighborhood, she stopped asking to play with me so much.”

“Poor Seina-nii-chan.”

“Hah. Anyway, when you play with boys, especially older ones, the kinds of games you play and where you go change, so it wasn’t like we were together all the time. Besides, when we were at home, we could talk normally, she took care of my injuries, and when I was hospitalized, she even brought me a change of clothes…”

“In other words, even when you were just playing around, there were often times when

Master couldn’t move.”

“Poor big brother.”

“Really...”

It wasn’t just Neeju; NB had tears in his eyes, too.

“Well, we’re here. This is Master’s house.”

At the top of the wide staircase stood a Juraian-style house. As expected of a captain’s residence, the yard was spacious, though it was simple, just a lawn, with only some shrubs serving as a fence.

“You can customize the garden to your liking. You can spend time on it yourself, or decide on a design and have it automatically generated in accelerated space.”

“Do you have any requests, Neeju-chan?”

“I won’t be staying here that long, so this is plenty. The view is nice, too.”

From the garden, the entire residential district was visible at a glance, and it was a spectacular view in a different way than the one seen from the park.

“You’re right. Well, shall we go inside?”

“Yeah. Big brother, you’d better take a bath soon, or you’ll catch a cold.”

“My clothes are already dry, so I’m fine…”

“No way. You’ve got mud on your head and stuff. Let’s take a shower before dinner. Should I wash your back for you?”

With a look of pure delight on her face, Neeju nudged Seina’s back and led him into the entranceway.

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“Damn!”

“Kiriko!”

Amane stopped Kiriko, who had jumped to her feet in a panic.

“Calm down. What reason do you have for barging in? Are you going to say you've been monitoring what they’ve been doing?”

“W-well… But!!”

“Kiriko-san, if you think about it calmly, you’ll realize that girl is just teasing us, right? Besides, since Seina-san, the one who matters most, only sees her as a little sister, nothing’s going to

happen… probably."

"Elma, Seina's preferences don't include a 'loli' fetish, do they?"

"No, he's perfectly normal in that regard. Or rather, perhaps influenced by a certain someone and her mother, he seems to prefer older women?"

"Elma, we're getting off track." Amane nudged Elma with her elbow.

Elma cleared her throat softly and continued her explanation.

"...Anyway, what Seina-san feels is clearly nothing but sympathy and a desire to protect that girl. Intuitively, I think it's the same as with Ryo-chan the other day."

Amane and Elma tried to calm Kiriko down by going over each fact one by one.

"That's… true. But what if, just in case…"

"Come on, Kiriko. If Seina's self-control were that weak, something would've already happened between him and us or Hakuren's group. Especially Gyokuren, even though she hasn't taken any deliberate action as promised, just the fact that she harbors feelings for him is enough to make any ordinary guy fall head over heels."

"Exactly! I mean, even from a woman's perspective, it's enough to make your heart race... That's practically cheating." Elma clenched her fists, tears welling up in the corners of her eyes, as she spoke passionately.

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

"What do you mean, 'I guess you're right'?! In that sense, Amane-san is just the same! She's way too sloppy and careless. In your case, just lying on the sofa in a tank top and cut off jeans is an eyesore! It's pure poison!"

"Aaaah, I get it, I get it. I'll be more careful from now on."

Elma pounced on Amane with the same fervor as a large dog giving a warm welcome. Amane desperately tried to pry her off while glancing at Kiriko.

"W-well, for now, NB is with them, so she won't do anything right away, right? Besides, regardless of what's inside, she looks like a kid on the outside. There's only so much she can do."

"Well… that's true."

"Still, it's annoying to be pushed around by some little brat, isn't it?"

"What do you suggest we do?"

"I'm not going to do anything. Just be as sloppy as usual, like Elma said." Amane smiled smugly. "Now then, which house should I choose?"

After passing through several teleportation gates, Seto and Kuisu arrived at the Kamiki family's private spaceport. A very ordinary small spaceship was docked there, and King Balta stood in front of the gangway with several attendants. Seeing them off were only ten Juraian warriors and five senior ladies-in-waiting. The two ran over to the spot where the king of a nation was receiving such a lonely send-off upon his return home.

"Oh, Seto-dono. You came to see me off?"

"I'm truly sorry about this time. Next time, I'll make sure you're treated like a state guest."

"Oh, don't worry about it. I'm not really one for all that fanfare."

With that, Seto suddenly lowered her voice and leaned closer to King Balta. "I'm grateful to hear you say that. By the way, Seina-dono and Neeju-dono just left, so please take care of that matter I mentioned."

"Ah, the arrangements are all set." In response to Seto, Balta also leaned in and flashed a sly grin.

"If all goes well, the airspace around there will be… Make sure you handle this properly."

"I won't let those shut-in idiots get the better of me."

"Hahahaahaha…"

"Heh heh heh heh heh…"

Like a corrupt magistrate and a merchant in a period drama, Seto and Balta looked each other in the eye and laughed eerily.

"Well then, I'll leave the rest to you♡"

With a quick wave of her hand, Seto ran off with Kuisu with the same momentum she'd arrived with.

"What's all the fuss about... Huh!?"

For a moment, King Balta tilted his head in puzzlement, but when he saw the group chasing after Seto, he realized why.

When Gyokuren and the others reached him, they knelt and bowed deeply.

"King Balta, please forgive our rudeness."

"Oh, it's fine. But if you don't hurry, they'll get away."

"Thank you. Excuse us!" Gyokuren and the others said briefly, then immediately set off in pursuit of Seto.

Following them, Balta's boisterous laughter could be heard.

“Damn it, that bearded guy! He could’ve at least slowed them down a little!” Hearing King Balta’s laughter, Seto puffed out her cheeks in annoyance.

“Better safe than sorry. But seeing Gyokuren-chan’s face, I guess that’s impossible. After all, she’s got quite the killer instinct.”

“That was a miscalculation. I thought getting her moving would calm her down a bit…”

“I’m the one who miscalculated. I figured it would take them a little longer to catch up…”

“Well, let’s just be honest and be happy about our subordinates’ growth. The real problem is Gyokuren-chan, isn’t it? She usually seems so carefree, so she doesn’t look like the type who can stay angry for long…”

“In that case, no amount of exercise will help.”

“...A report from Renza?”

“It’s common knowledge among those in the know… Apparently, it’s a well-known story in those circles. I’ll give you the full report later, but in a nutshell, it’s a ‘poisonous curse.’”

“……I see. That makes sense, sort of. Just like with Widow, maybe attracting troublesome women like that is just part of Seina-dono’s bad luck.”

“Considering her past, you could say she’s mellowed out quite a bit. Well, wouldn’t letting her land a punch or two help her calm down?”

“Don’t say that so casually as if it’s none of your business!”

“She’s directing that killing intent at me, too.”

Which meant Kuisu was a prime candidate to get punched herself.

“...Anyway, let’s just finish this job quickly and escape into the cage on Mikagami’s Bridge!”

Up until then, they’d been mindful of appearances and hadn’t run in a particularly unsightly manner, but now, as if they no longer cared how they looked, the two of them picked up the pace.

At a high-level quarantine research facility directly under the jurisdiction of the Juraian Imperial Court, the dismantling and investigation of the previous Kamidake was underway.

The ship’s data was being collected through repeated precision scans of the hull in every possible state, from the unit itself down to the smallest parts.

“I brought dinner home... Wait, what? Are you by yourself, Hakuryo-kun?”

Tennyo emerged from the transfer gate carrying a large lunchbox, looking cheerful, only to notice that Airi, who should have been there, was missing. Of course, the disassembly and investigation were all done by automated programs, so a detailed operation was unnecessary. Therefore, constant monitoring wasn't required, but as a scientist, it was only natural to want to see even a small amount of data as soon as possible. Possible reasons for her abandoning the task could be a physiological reaction or perhaps...

“Speaking of things more interesting than this…”

As Tennyo pondered, Hakuryo gave a wry smile and pointed to the floor below in the open atrium.

“Heheheheheh.”

Just then, an eerie laugh, reminiscent of a witch from a fairy tale, echoed up from below. Tennyo handed the lunchbox to Hakuryo and went down the stairs, where she found Airi wearing a monitor with black-rimmed glasses sitting cross-legged on a chair. The kind a strict female teacher might wear.

“I can see your panties.”

“Does that turn you on?”

“It does. It turns me on so much I want to punch someone.” Tennyo brushed it off nonchalantly.

“More importantly, are you controlling NB to spy again? Kirche-chan’s complaints always come to me, you know… Seriously, I’ve lost count of how many times I’ve had to comfort that crying girl…”

“That’s what NB is for! Don’t get in the way of my fun.”

“Whoa… Seina-chan, it’s dangerous to accept free stuff from a Philosopher.” Tennyo muttered, her gaze fixed on the distance.

“Speaking of which, I heard from the delivery girl that Seto-sama seems to be getting chased around by Gyokuren-chan and the others. Apparently, even her direct attendants are backing them up.”

Airi was surrounded by a shield, making it impossible to directly intervene. So Tennyo brought up a topic that she thought might pique her interest.

“Huh… Well, she’s getting what she deserves for her bad behavior. She brought it upon herself.” But Airi spun her chair around and turned her back on Tennyo, looking completely uninterested.

“Aren’t you going to join in?”

“It’ll be over in no time anyway. Going now wouldn’t be much fun, and in that sense, this is way more fun, isn’t it? ♡”

“Fun, is it…? Please don’t do anything too strange. After all, there’s no guarantee that what happened to Seto-sama won’t happen to Airi-sama tomorrow.”

“Hehe… Right now, Seina-kun and that girl are in the middle of a standoff over whether they’re going to take a bath together or not.” Paying no heed to Tennyo’s warning, Airi flashed a lewd smile.

For a Philosopher, earning someone’s hatred was a daily occurrence, it was practically a badge of honor.

“That girl… you mean the one we’ve been talking about? But regardless of what the other person is thinking, to Seina-chan, she’s just a little kid, isn’t she? Her psychological profile doesn’t suggest she has any interest in that sort of thing, so why is there a standoff?”

“Seina-kun’s defensive instincts must have realized that girl’s true nature… Oh, look, he’s given in to her tearful pleas.”

“Huh!?”

Tennyo must have gotten a little curious too, as she quickly accessed the NB. But since Airi held the control rights, Tennyo headed to that house in Kirche’s data sector.

“There are quite a few more houses now.”

Within the virtual space, vast natural landscapes spread out around Kirche’s house, and many homes now stood in what had once been an empty area. Those homes were inhabited by Synchro Data Entities like Tennyo herself, or Seina, who was currently sleeping in Kirche’s house. They were primarily researchers studying Seina’s probability anomalies, and occasionally served as conversation partners for Kirche. Naturally, they were all people approved by Airi and Seto. And sometimes, their requests even determined NB’s actions. In short, they were one of the factors behind NB’s erratic behavior.

“Kirche!”

Kirche was standing at the entrance, as if waiting for Tennyo’s arrival.

“Come in, Tennyo-san.”

“As you saw, I’m sorry. …Anyway, I was worried, so I came by.”

“Please don’t worry about it. I’m a little worried myself.”

When Tennyo entered the living room, there was already someone there.

“Hiroshi-san and Raireza! Were you here?”

“Well, well, it seems we have just the right person here. Come, have a seat.”

Tennyo and Kirche sat down across from Raireza and Hiroshi, staring intently at the visual feed from NB displayed on the large TV. The bathroom where Seina and Neeju were located

was Juraian-style, about twenty tatami mats in size. And the two of them were chatting amiably in the bathtub.

“Well, there doesn’t seem to be anything suspicious going on right now, though.”

“By the way, why are you two here?”

“I came here to investigate Miki, but…”

“Well, I was asked for my opinion by a young lady who’s a bit inexperienced. She wanted to know if those two looked suspicious.”

At Raireza’s words, Kirche blushed bright red and looked down.

“Well, if Neeju is just an ordinary girl, then I suppose there’s no need to worry.” Hiroshi quickly interjected, as if to defend Kirche.

“Tennyo-san, is that why you came here too?”

“Yes, that’s right… Hmm!? Raireza just said that the perfect candidate had arrived. What did she mean by that?”

“It means that instead of Hiro-kun and I observing him through a monitor, the perfect way to judge that boy’s mental state is sleeping right there in the bedroom.”

“Huh!?”

The data entity linked to Seina’s subconscious only revealed his true feelings directly when he was in a dormant state.

“Miss Kirche is too embarrassed to check herself, and she says she doesn’t want me to check either…”

“As a man myself, I’d feel… well, how should I put it… anyway, if I were in his shoes, I’d have mixed feelings.”

“And then the boy's older sister makes her appearance.”

Glancing at the flustered Kirche, Raireza smiled.

“Raireza. You really need to watch how you speak…”

“Oh my, you’re acting like such a kind father, Hiro-kun.”

“I see… In that case, I’ll look into it.”

Tennyo stood up abruptly and, on her way to the bedroom where Seina’s data form was sleeping, glanced briefly at Kirche. She was staring anxiously at the TV screen. Just then, Neeju was washing Seina’s back.

(It’s so heartbreaking to just watch through a monitor, isn’t it?)

The usual Kirche would never even think of checking on Seina's data body, let alone ask someone else to do it. But the frustration of being unable to interact with Seina directly had been building up, and with Neeju's provocation, her uncontrollable emotions overflowed like water spilling from a bucket.

(She's already being toyed with by Airi-sama… I really need to let her blow off some steam.)

A dozen or so minutes later, Tennyo emerged with a cheerful expression and, seeing Kirche staring at her with concern, said, "It's okay," and nodded firmly.

Kirche looked relieved, while Raireza gave a wry smile. Hiroshi, meanwhile, gazed at the bedroom Tennyo had emerged from with a look of mixed emotions on his face.

"You've got a lot on your plate too, Seina-kun…"

Tears of sympathy welled up in Hiroshi's eyes. In the end, it seemed that all sorts of misfortunes were destined to find their way back to Seina.

After getting out of the bath, Seina and Neeju came out wearing pajama-like loungewear.

"So, next up is dinner… Hey, NB, how does the cooking system on this ship work?"

"There's a kitchen, so you can cook for yourself if you want, or you can order from the cooking system. Of course, we've got plenty of ingredients stocked up, so it's entirely up to you."

"Then, could you access the cooking system for me?"

"Sure thing."

NB accessed Kamidake's central cooking system and displayed the menu.

"Wow! What is this?"

"...That's amazing."

Seina and Neeju were speechless as they looked at the menu. An unimaginable number of dishes were displayed there.

"I'm blown away. It's got all the major dishes from every single planet in the Galactic Federation… and to think I'd come across a lost recipe in a place like this…"

"Lost recipes?"

"It's a bit of a grand way of putting it, but it's more accurate to say a recipe that's fallen out of use. Back when the Galactic Federation was formed and people from all sorts of planets started coming to the Academy, the very first problem that arose was a change in dietary habits. As a result, more people wanted to eat their home-countries cuisine, but distribution wasn't as developed as it is now. Even if they wanted to cook it themselves, they couldn't get

the ingredients. That's where substitutes came in. Master, you have something called vegetarian cuisine, right?"

"Ah, I see... So, you're talking about recreating similar flavors and textures using substitutes?"

"Exactly. But as time went on, thanks to advances in distribution and the specialization of industries, ingredients that were previously unavailable became available. Once that happened, substitutes lost their purpose, so they'll become a thing of the past."

"The Academy must have advanced synthesis technology, right?"

"That's an amateur's way of thinking. Even for a single ingredient, we sometimes have to choose based on the region of origin, the season, the harvest time, and the degree of ripeness. Ordering samples of all those and analyzing them… well, that's not realistic from a cost-effectiveness standpoint. If we used something like that, a single meal could end up costing a month's salary. Besides, synthetic products weren't really popular."

"Even though they're exactly the same as the real thing? Substitutes are pretty much the same, aren't they?"

"Strictly speaking, they're not the same! Even with the same crop and the same growing conditions, there are variations in quality, shape, and size, right? If you keep eating synthetic products, you gradually start to notice that unnatural quality, the unnaturalness that isn't unnatural. It's even more pronounced after Bio-Enhancement. Of course, if we keep accumulating data, we'll eventually be able to create something that doesn't bother you, but as I said earlier, thanks to the development of distribution networks, there's no longer any need to go to such lengths."

"True…"

"And, well… that's what makes the Academy the Academy. It's become a competition to see how many different regional dishes you can create using substitutes available anywhere. Some of the best ones have even been re-imported and become staples in their original regions. A lot of them are still used on GP ships today, you know."

"I see. That's typical of the Academy, which loves festivals… So, it's a menu unique to a place with limited supplies on board, right?"

"Yeah, that's about right."

Seina looked on in puzzlement as NB and Neeju seemed to hit it off.

"But if they're still being used today, what do you mean by 'lost recipe?"

"People's tastes vary. It might not be for everyone, but if it isn't at least somewhat popular, it won't be passed down."

"Could it be that the origin of the legend is..."

"A lot of them have pretty niche flavors! Of course, more than half are perfectly normal… but

hey, why not give it a try just for something to talk about?”

“What do you think, bro?”

“In my case, even with the 'decent' ones, I feel like I'd probably end up with a dud...”

“We’ll probably have all kinds of guests over eventually, so why not have Master’s classmates try them too? I’m sure Kenneth-han would definitely be interested, don’t you think?”

“Ah, that’s possible. He'll probably eat too much and get a stomachache... I'm sure of it.”

“He’s such a good sport, Kenneth-han.”

“Even so, this is definitely too much.”

“Just filter them based on Master’s past preference data. It’ll show how highly recommended each one is, so if you choose from that, I don’t think you’ll go wrong.”

While NB and Seina were talking, Neeju’s eyes fell on a group of menu items, and she nodded in admiration.

“They even have items from Melmas…”

Some of them were Neeju’s favorites.

“It was cramped in the box, but the food was a different story… Hey, big brother. If you’re having trouble deciding, would you mind ordering the same thing as me?” Neeju said as she placed her order without waiting for Seina’s reply.

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“So, did you like it? I couldn’t help but pick it because it’s a dish from my hometown…”

Neeju looked at Seina with concern. That was because some of the dishes she had chosen were significantly different from the typical tastes at the Academy.

“Yeah, it was delicious. There’s actually one that tastes just like Earth food.”

What Neeju had ordered was exactly like Earth curry.

“I’ve been searching for it ever since I came to space, but I couldn’t find any… Usually, Kiriko-san has curry roux shipped in from Earth and secretly makes it for me, but I never expected to find it here.”

The curry wasn’t exactly popular with anyone other than Seina and Kiriko. Even Gyokuren, who adored Seina, had never managed to finish a whole plate. By the way, her hayashi rice was quite popular.

“Really? That’s great.”

Seeing Seina’s happy expression, Neeju smiled warmly. Just knowing there was something

similar to the food from her hometown made her feel a sense of kinship.

“More importantly, how was it for you, Neeju-chan? Did it feel strange compared to what you’re used to back home? On the flip side, I hear that even small differences can be hard to handle when you’re used to something…”

“About half the ingredients and spices seem to be substitutes, but I was surprised at how well it turned out. Plus, it looks like there are still plenty of variations to try, so I’m looking forward to it♡”

“I never expected Master’s tastes to suddenly include something so niche…”

“Well, it’s sweet with just a hint of spice, I’d say.”

“The medium level was just right for me.”

“You can adjust the spice level, so you can do that next time.”

“Wow, I’ve unexpectedly gained something new to look forward to… Well, I guess it’s about time we entered the acceleration zone.”

“...Hey, big brother... Can I sleep with you?” Neeju looked down slightly and asked shyly.

“Yeah, that's fine.”

Once they’d cleared the hurdle of taking a bath together, Seina no longer felt any sense of formality toward Neeju. In Seina’s mind, Neeju had already become like a little sister.

“NB, where exactly is the Acceleration Space room?”

“The whole house is fine. If you really want to, you can apply it to the entire residential district.”

“There’s no need to go that far. So, could you just apply it to the whole house for now?”

“Got it.”

With a slight sense of unease, the house entered an accelerated state.

“It doesn't have to be the whole house, wouldn't just the bedroom be enough?”

“Sorry. I want to study a little before bed, so could you play by yourself for a bit?”

“Study?”

“A lot has happened, so I'm a little behind my classmates in the curriculum.”

“Sure, that’s fine. I need to take a break from eating, anyway.”

“Okay, NB, I'm counting on you.”

“Got it.”

Seina hid inside the Secret Wall with NB, and Neeju started watching a video.

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“Oh, big brother!”

Seina emerged from the Secret Wall about three hours later in accelerated space time. Neeju, who had already changed into her pajamas, jumped off the sofa as if she’d been waiting impatiently.

“I'm going to go change, so wait here for a bit.”

“Well, I’ll head to the bedroom first.”

Watching Neeju’s back as she scampered toward the bedroom reminded him of Ryo-Ohki, who had slept with him the other day.

“I absolutely have to protect her.”

With renewed determination, Seina headed for the bathroom.

Chapter Four: Fuku · Birth

Ten minutes before they jumped out of hyperspace, Seina and the rest of the crew, having all finished their rest periods, were gathered on the bridge.

“……Five, four, three, two, …… Jump out. We’ve returned to normal space. Coordinates confirmed, no deviation from the planned position.”

“No abnormalities in the hull or systems!”

“Detection on wide-area radar! Shape is a D-099 modified model. It’s not in our ship registry so it’s likely a reconnaissance vessel. It doesn’t seem to have noticed us yet.”

“That’s the lag caused by Kamidake’s high detection capabilities… but they’ll notice us soon. Captain!”

“Set course, emergency jump!”

“The enemy has spotted us!”

A split second after Elma’s shout, the Kamidake jumped.

“The next jump-out will decide the outcome.”

“If they're pirates, watch out for those paint rounds.”

“Kiriko, direct attacks are still off-limits, right?”

“Yes. Just enough so they don't figure out our intentions.”

“Twenty seconds until the jump-out! ……Ten, nine…”

As Elma counted down, everyone began to focus.

“Three, two, …… Jump out!”

As expected, pirates were lying in wait in the normal space Kamidake jumped out into.

“Five enemy vessels currently in the engagement zone.”

“Two enemy ships approaching via short-range jump! They’re within range.”

Two pirate ships simultaneously launched attacks with projectiles. But Kamidake easily dodged them and fired a beam at one of the projectiles.

“Detecting gravitational energy! It’s those paint rounds again. Be careful.”

“The guys who attacked us the other day were far more skilled. Even if dozens of ships came at us, we won't be hit!”

“Don't let your guard down! Reinforcements are coming right behind them!”

“I know. But the ships' performance has improved so much that I don't think they can hit us.”

But just as an elated Amane said that…

Crack! Whoosh!

A crack appeared in the unit at the center of the table, and something resembling steam spewed out from it.

“Ship control down 3%!”

“Enemy ship ahead!”

The enemy that had jumped out launched an attack on the Kamidake. For a split second, Amane, distracted by the unit’s damage, performed a sudden evasive maneuver.

Crack! Beep!

“Control rate down another 8%! Amane-san!”

“I know that!”

“Kiriko, get the escape pod ready! Neeju, hurry up and move!”

“Big brother!?”

Neeju’s confusion was understandable. A ship that had just been launched, a brand-new

vessel built by Hakubi Washu, no less, and its interior was a treasure trove… She couldn't believe they were abandoning it.

"Kiriko-san, please!"

"Captain!?"

Seina's instinct for danger was spot-on. Kiriko's hesitation lasted only a moment.

"Roger!"

As she opened the gate housing the escape pod, Kiriko took Neeju's hand. But then, the gate suddenly vanished.

"Link lost! The bridge has been isolated! Communications are down! Only the control systems and some of the operating systems are barely functioning!!"

"So we'll just have to make do with what we've got, I guess."

"……No way…… This is a ship built by Washu-sama."

"Even geniuses make mistakes! Well, or maybe…"

"Or…?"

At that, everyone turned to look at Seina at once.

"I guess Master's bad luck just outweighed the genius."

"You idiot! Why are you rubbing salt in the wound?!"

"Exactly! He's so insensitive!"

"You all looked at Master too, didn't you?!"

"……S-sorry."

Seina couldn't bear it anymore; he shrank back and looked down.

"It's okay, big brother! I'm sure the old ladies will figure something out."

"Don't call me 'old lady'! You loli-granny!"

"Stop saying unnecessary things and get to work! Old lady!!"

"Hmph! You sure have the nerve to say that so casually."

"Come on, stop fighting! NB, look for an access point too!"

"I'm doing it right now!"

“Enemies are coming!”

“……”

Amane concentrated to the absolute limit, controlling the ship with feather-light precision. Amane, who had always possessed keen intuition, could predict the enemy’s movements with near-perfect accuracy, but her predictions now bordered on precognition. Thanks to that, the strain on the unit was kept to a minimum, but…

Snap! Crackle! The cracks in the unit kept getting bigger.

“We'll be in hyperspace-jump range in one minute!”

“Keep going like this.”

It was a tone that sounded like a prayer.

“Something’s jumping out ahead!”

“Damn it! They didn't let us slip by after all!”

With Amane’s growl, the pirate ship that had jumped out fired a paint round at the Kamidake.

“We’ve been hit by a paint round! Aaah!!”

The moment Elma finished her report, all the monitors went dark.

Sssssss…

Everyone stared silently at the unit spewing steam.

“NB! What about the control points!? Kiriko-san, Elma-san!” Seina, who had recovered from the shock in an instant, stood up and shouted.

However, Kiriko and Elma shook their heads silently.

“...No way. We’re completely trapped.”

“No way…”

Seina slumped forward, resting his hands on the table, and glared at the unit with a look of resentment.

“Neeju-chan… I’m sorry. I couldn’t protect you… Huh?”

Just as Seina tried to look toward Neeju, with a snap and a pop, something long and hairy emerged from a crack in the unit.

“What!?”

Stunned by the sudden turn of events, Seina watched as the unit swayed unsteadily. Then it

began to slowly topple over.

“!!!”

Everyone reflexively reached out toward the unit as it collapsed, spewing steam. But, mercilessly, the unit fell onto the table right before their hands could reach it.

“!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

With inarticulate screams, everyone leaped back from the unit and threw themselves to the floor, bracing for the shock of the explosion. But nothing happened at all. Instead, what reached the ears of Seina and the crew, lying on the floor, was:

“F… Fumya…” A feeble meow.

“……Huh? Wait, what?”

Looking up in puzzlement, Seina and the others saw a tiny creature, something that looked like a slightly smaller version of Ryo-Ohki, peeking out from the unit, looking rather pitiful.

“Meow”

The little one, whose eyes met Seina’s, meowed in a pitiful voice. At that very moment, a flood of light erupted inside the bridge. The monitors, flickering on and off, looked like thousands of fireworks being launched into the night sky, as if the spectacle were happening right before their eyes.

(W-what is this!?)

Kiriko recognized the software being installed. It looked similar to what she had seen on Mikagami’s bridge. However the version that flashed across the screen was clearly newer than the one Seto was using.

“Kiriko-san!”

Startled by Seina’s sudden shout, Kiriko looked up.

“Oh no, we’re still in combat!”

The installation was still ongoing, but the navigation software had already launched and was

displaying the view outside. What was shown there was the moment when reinforcements were arriving one after another and opening fire all at once toward Kamidake.

“Brace for impact!”

At Kiriko’s warning, everyone clung to the nearby chairs. However, they felt no impact from a direct hit; the only indication that the enemy’s attack had struck was the white flash on the monitor showing the immediate vicinity.

“Mya! Myaaaaaaaaan!!”

The moment the ship took the direct hit, the hull reacted instantly to the little one’s scream, which sounded almost like a cry of terror.

With a deep, rumbling ‘Boom!’, the red paint on the hull’s exterior vanished in an instant. The massive shockwave generated twisted the enemy’s attack, sending it off course. And just like a spinning top touching something, the Kamidake suddenly sprang into motion.

“Kyaaaaaa!!”

The G-forces generated by that sudden movement struck the bridge, which should have been anchored in subspace. Although most of it was absorbed by inertial control, it felt like being caught in an earthquake of magnitude 8. But the pirates were witnessing an even more unbelievable sight.

Kamidake looked just like a superball, colliding with everything in sight and moving in a completely erratic manner. And it was doing so while spinning vertically at high speed, repeatedly vanishing and reappearing.

(T-Teleportation! The instantaneous movement I saw in the reference footage, where an Imperial Ship sheds its outer hull and moves as a bare unit!!)

This was different from normal hyperspace travel; it was a phenomenon similar to skipping a flat stone across the water’s surface, forcibly thrusting into hyperspace along with normal space.

In the blink of an eye, the Kamidake had broken away from the combat zone and plunged into hyperspace.

“Incredible... No, the word 'incredible' seems inadequate! To remove that paint in an instant and then performing those movements! And... this hyperspace...”

The view projected outside was bathed in a light different from that of normal hyperspace. Kiriko hesitated for a moment at Elma’s question, but…

“This is the hyperspace used for communications… Only Imperial Ships can pass through here.”

“Only Imperial Ships? But…!?”

“We don’t use it when anyone other than authorized personnel are on board. If word got out,

it could cause all sorts of problems… I'd appreciate it if you could keep this to yourself."

The "Imperial Ship," with its already extraordinary capabilities, was a source of awe for other nations. That was why various restrictions were placed on its operations. However, one area where it was virtually on par with ships from other nations was mobility. The fact that there was little difference in travel speed as long as they used the same hyperspace was a factor that provided a certain degree of reassurance to other nations.

"Neeju-sama."

Their biggest concern was Neeju.

"I saw it on Mikagami." Neeju said briefly, then smiled as if to reassure Kiriko.

Kiriko responded with a small nod.

"In theory, a ship about ten meters long could enter hyperspace for communications if it were equipped with a planetary-class ship's generator."

"The hull would be blown to pieces the instant it happened. And if you had to put up a shield strong enough to handle that… Man, Imperial Ships really are something else."

"Very little is actually known about Imperial Ships. There were rumors that it might be possible to enter one, but it was common knowledge that it was impossible based on the maximum energy values recorded."

"So that recorded maximum energy value wasn't actually the absolute maximum?"

"That's right. But if this ship can pass through here, then Ryo-Ohki must be able to..."

"Naturally, that means Ryo-Ohki can pass through this hyperspace as well."

To be honest, Kiriko had been skeptical when she heard that Ryo-Ohki had the same performance as the Royal Trees. But the actual sensation of being on this ship was every bit as good as, if not better than that of a second-generation vessel, the Mikagami.

"W-wow… So this ship is the same class as Ryo-Ohki, huh?"

"I've been given quite the present… Wait, hey, several new subspaces has been added and fixed in place…" Amane was left speechless mid-sentence.

There, she could see four plate-shaped living quarters, each covering an area the size of Shikoku (**TN: 7000ish sq. miles**), firmly in place. Spring countryside, summer sea, autumn mountains, and midwinter mountain ranges. Each had been adjusted so that all four seasons could be seen at once. The living quarters that had existed in the initial phase were merely a fraction of that.

"As for navigation software, something this amazing could only have come from Airi-sama's, or rather, the previous Kamidake's, workshop… No, this is even better than that." Elma slumped back into her chair, leaning against it as if collapsing.

“It really makes me realize just how lenient my evaluation of the software was.”

“I see… So the reason the necessary software wasn’t included was because it was inside that little one.”

At Kiriko’s words, Amane and the others looked over at the little one.

“Fumya, fumya, fumyaaaaan”

The incredibly tiny creature Kiriko and the others were talking about was still struggling to break free from its eggshell.

“I can't believe it.”

“Yeah.”

Kiriko and the others watched the utterly ridiculous scene with puzzled expressions.

“Come on, stop struggling, little one.”

But the little one paid no heed to Neeju’s warning, flapping its protruding head and legs and starting to roll around.

“Fumyamya! Myaaaaa!”

Unable to bear the pitiful sight any longer, Neeju stopped the rolling little one with her hand. Now that she was held in place, the little one was able to brace herself and began looking around as if searching for something.

“Mya!”

Her gaze stopped dead on Seina. Then, with pleading eyes, she began to cry.

“Oh, little one. So you know who your master is, don’t you? …Hey, big brother. This little one’s asking for help.”

“Huh? Oh, yeah.”

Prompted by Neeju, Seina gently picked up the little one.

“Myaa! Myaa! Myaa!”

The little one wagged her tail, which had been sticking out of the eggshell, so hard it looked like it might snap, clearly overjoyed.

“Hahaha… I see. I’ll get you out of there right away.”

Seeing the little one looking so happy, Seina couldn’t help but relax and smile. He hooked his finger around the eggshell and applied pressure, but…

“Huh? …Oh, wait, what?”

The eggshell didn’t budge an inch.

“What’s wrong, big brother?”

“This shell is hard…”

Seina’s face flushed, beads of sweat began to form on his forehead, and his fingers turned white from the pressure and trembled slightly. Seina’s Bio-Enhanced strength gave him a grip powerful enough to shatter rock, but even with that power, the egg didn’t budge an inch.

“Let me take a look, Master.” NB approached the little one and thrust a flexible manipulator inside the shell.

“Myagi!” The little one let out a strange growl and kicked NB with her foot.

Bam! NB was sent flying with great force and slammed into the large screen wall.

“What the hell are you doing, you little critter?!”

“Isn't it because you shoved some weird thing in there out of the blue?”

“It’s a laser cutter. It’s not some weird thing! I did it because I thought she might get hurt if I didn’t do it from the inside, and this ungrateful little critter, “

“There, there, little one. He’s trying to help you, so just bear with it a little.” Neeju gently stroked her head.

As if understanding those words, the little one pulled back the foot it had stuck out.

“NB, please.”

“...I’d like to say ‘fine, whatever,’ but that eggshell seems to be made of energy-resistant material, so maybe an ultrasonic cutter... or since there’s already a crack in it, maybe we should just use something like a hammer.”

“I see… Hold on a sec, I’ll check where the tools are.”

“Don’t they have stuff like that on the bridge too?”

“Isn't this good enough?”

Stopping Elma as she looked around the bridge, Amane gave a faint smile and gripped NB firmly.

“W-what are you doing!?”

“Captain, can I borrow this for a moment?”

Amane set the little one down on the table as she took the egg from Seina, then began carefully inspecting the cracks.

“H-hold on, Amane-han… I can’t believe you’d do this, but are you going to…”

“Ah, this spot looks good. Here, little one. This might be a bit noisy, but hide in your shell and curl up tight.” Amane said to the little one, ignoring NB’s question.

Perhaps sensing danger, the little one quickly retracted its protruding limbs and head.

“Good kid.”

“Whoa! Whoa! No way, no way, no way! Stop, stop, Amane-han~~!!”

Ignoring NB’s screams, Amane began to use NB to hammer on the eggshell.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

A high-pitched metallic sound echoed across the bridge.

Clang! Clang! Clang! Clang! Clang! Clang!

“It's resonating! It's resonating! It's resonating in my butt !! Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!”

Ignoring NB’s anguished screams, Amane kept hammering away. Then, noticing the resistance had changed, she stopped abruptly and tossed NB aside. She hooked her finger into the eggshell and squeezed hard.

Snap!

With a small sound like metal snapping, a piece of the shell chipped off.

“How about this, little one?”

“Mya?”

The little one, who had been tensing up inside her shell, suddenly relaxed. Realizing that the pressure against its body had changed, it twisted its body and wriggled out of the shell.

“Whoa!!!”

Amid the murmurs of Seina and the others watching, the little one wobbled unsteadily and walked straight toward Seina.

“Haha, you did great.”

“Myaaan♡”

Held in Seina’s arms, the little one rubbed its head against him, expressing its joy with every fiber of its being.

“That’s wonderful, little one… Oh, but it’s a shame for it to stay ‘little one’ forever. Big brother, why don’t you give it a name?”

“Me?”

“Well, of course, since you’re this child's master. That's better for the little one, right?”

“Mya!” The little one let out a meow, as if understanding Neeju’s words.

“Since the ship’s name is ‘Kamidake,’ I suppose this little one will end up with the same name, won’t it?”

“That would just confuse it.”

“You’re right… Captain, what do you think?”

“I’ll think of something.”

“Well then, first of all…”

NB suddenly barged in, grabbed the little one’s leg, and peered between its legs.

“Migya!!”

The little one kicked NB away with its other foot. With a strength that didn’t seem to match its tiny body, NB was slammed hard into the floor and then bounced all the way up near the ceiling. After hanging in the air for a long time, NB fell back down to the floor.

“What the hell are you doing, you little animal?!” NB yelled, rolling on the floor.

“NB… It’s only natural to get angry if you do something like that out of the blue!”

“I just thought it’d be better to know if it’s a boy or a girl before naming it!”

“Watch it, NB. This is, um, the little one’s body, you know.”

“After all, this ship was built with cutting-edge science. Can’t you even imagine what kind of defense systems it has?”

“……Ahhh, Master. Since she's a girl, you should give her a cute name.”

Perhaps Amane and the others’ threats had worked; after saying that meekly, NB quickly hid behind a corner.

“Miyaaa~, Huuu~”

Gazing in the direction where NB was hiding and growling, Seina gently stroked the little one to calm her down while racking his brain for ideas.

“Hmm… I guess so… A name with good fortune would be best, right?”

But Seina’s answer came surprisingly quickly.

“Yeah. How about ‘Fuku’ from ‘happiness’?”

“If we're going with 'happiness,' wouldn't 'Kō' be good too?”

“That’s true… but ‘Kō’ can also mean ‘misfortune.’ On the other hand, I’ve never heard ‘Fuku’ paired with any unpleasant words… Hahaha.”

“C-Captain…”

Reflecting once more on Seina’s life up to that point, tears welled up in Kiriko and the girls’ eyes.

“Yeah! That’s a great name. Fuku-chan… your name is Fuku.” Neeju stroked Fuku happily.

Fuku blinked her eyes and looked from Neeju to Seina. It seemed like she was signaling to Seina that she wanted him to say it properly.

“...Fuku. Your name is Fuku.” Seina gazed intently at Fuku as he called out her name.

“……Mya! Myaa!” Fuku meowed with a beaming smile, as if she understood that was her name.

“Myaa! Myaa!”

Wagging her tail so hard it looked like it might snap, Fuku expressed her joy with her whole body. At that heartwarming sight, Kiriko and the others couldn’t help but smile.

“……Ah!”

But at that moment, Amane was the first to notice something important.

“What’s wrong? Why are you suddenly yelling?”

“……Come to think of it, where is this ship flying to?”

At those words, everyone froze for a moment.

“No, no way! How careless!!”

That rebuke was directed at herself. Kiriko, seated at the operator’s console, quickly began checking their course, with Elma following shortly after. But the tension quickly eased.

“Thank goodness… it’s set correctly. But I wonder why?”

“Oh, if it's about setting the route, I did that.”

“Captain?! But when did that happen?”

“Right before we entered hyperspace, Fuku… well, I felt like she asked where I wanted to go, so I instinctively set the course…” Seina said this as if retracing his memory.

“Myaa!” Fuku meowed as if to confirm it.

“That’s amazing. You and Fuku-chan have perfect teamwork. On the other hand...” Neeju sighed softly and looked at Kiriko and the others.

“...We’re ashamed of ourselves.” With a sigh, Kiriko and the crew hung their heads in embarrassment.

But the very next moment, “Aaaaaaah!!” Kiriko screamed.

“What!? What happened!?”

“The initial configuration has been deleted!”

“Well… since the program was completely rewritten just now, that was bound to happen.”

“This is no joke! If we're unlucky, there's a chance the ship registration application hasn't even been submitted yet!”

Kiriko’s eyebrows shot up at Amane’s carefree remark. There was a possibility that a problem had arisen due to the earlier program rewrite before the application reached the government office and was accepted.

“In some cases, there’s even a chance of a duplicate application. If the ship isn’t registered, the moment we exit hyperspace, we’ll be treated as a suspicious vessel!”

“Oh, that’s bad. If we run into a patrol ship, we might even get attacked.”

Within Jurai’s territorial space and in non-aligned space, it was possible to navigate without a ship registry. However, the next jump-out destination was within another nation’s territorial space. When Minaho said the procedural issues had been cleared, she meant only that there were no problems with the ship becoming Seina’s property, it didn’t mean the registration process was actually complete. During the test voyage, to prepare for any potential issues, the ship was strictly treated as a Juraian test vessel. The plan was to officially register the ship only if no problems arose during that phase.

“Huh? But Kiriko-san, I’ve received a reply to the ship registration application.”

“What!? ...Oh, you're right.”

“Well, well, looks like it was just a false alarm. I mean, just because it involves the captain doesn’t mean trouble always happens. You worry too much, Kiriko.”

“I guess so.”

Kiriko stared intently at the ship registration code she had received. Then, as if relieved, she let out a deep sigh and began entering the code into the required fields. However, it wasn’t until about a year later that Kiriko would come to regret not double-checking the accepted application.

“Vessel registration entered. Amane, how’s it going on your end?”

“Ah… I’ve got the piloting and attack systems covered. But seriously, Hakubi Washu is amazing. She really thought of everything, meticulous down to the finest detail… Once you get used to this, you can’t use any other programs.”

“I’ve finished checking my end as well.”

“Captain, all checks are complete. It’s almost time to jump out, so please return to your seat.” After finishing her final checks, Kiriko called out to Seina and Neeju, who had been playing with Fuku.

“Roger. Then Neeju-chan, please return to your seat.” Seina said as he picked up Fuku and headed toward the captain’s seat.

“Just to be safe, everyone, please assume shock-resistant defensive stances.”

At Kiriko’s words, everyone’s seats were enveloped in an inertial field.

“Thirty seconds to jump-out… nine, eight, seven…”

As the countdown ticked away, everyone’s faces grew tense. The only one who wasn’t tense was Fuku, who was in high spirits in Seina’s arms.

“Jump out! We’ve exited into normal space.”

But it was surprisingly anticlimactic.

“……Hmm, there seems to less shock than usual?”

“All systems clear. No abnormalities.”

But the problem occurred when they switched from autopilot to manual control. The ship suddenly began veering off course.

“What the hell!? The controls suddenly...?”

No matter what Amane tried, she could no longer control the ship as she intended. And it wasn’t limited to just the ship’s controls.

“An anomaly in the operating system! Access to the ship has plummeted!”

“Cut all weapon controls! Limit all other controls as well!” Amane’s decision was swift.

She retained only the bare minimum and cut off all other access.

“The operating system is back to normal!”

“Elma, please get rid of anything unnecessary or anything that can be handled with a downgraded version!”

“Roger!”

Following Amane’s lead, Kiriko and Elma also began their work. Seina, unable to do anything, watched Kiriko and the crew work intently.

“Myaa, myaa!”

Fuku, who could no longer get Seina’s attention, looked up at him and meowed.

“Big brother!” At that moment, something must have occurred to her. Neeju, who had been watching Seina and Fuku, called out.

“Huh?”

Seina looked over at Neeju and noticed her gaze was fixed on Fuku. In an instant, he realized what Neeju was trying to say.

Seina picked up Fuku in both arms and approached the central table.

“T-The access rate is rising!”

“Really!?”

Seeing Elma’s report and Seina’s actions, Kiriko and Amane realized the cause of this anomaly. And just as they had predicted, when Seina took Fuku to the spot where the egg unit had been, the access value reached its peak.

“So, does that mean… if Fuku isn’t on that table, we can’t properly control the ship?”

“That’s hard to believe from a system standpoint. After all, Ryo-chan was controlling the ship even when she was outside.”

“Then why?”

“Well, Fuku-chan was just born. She’s still a baby.” Neeju said confidently to Kiriko and the others, who were tilting their heads in confusion.

It was an unexpected blind spot, but when you thought about it, it was all too obvious.

“That seems like the most likely answer. She probably hasn’t mastered that system yet.”

“Oh well, I guess we’ll just have to keep her on the table while we’re on the mission.”

“Still, the problem is how we’ll handle it when we have to operate 24 hours a day. I don’t think Fuku-chan can keep running without sleep.”

“In that case, we’ll just have to make do by using the acceleration space, won’t we? At the very least, as long as she stays in the center of the table, she should be able to maintain decent performance.”

“Amane-san… that’s a bit iffy, too. Neeju-sama, I’m sorry to ask, but could you please make

sure Fuku-chan doesn't move from the center?"

"I see. Understood." Neeju understood Elma's intention and received Fuku from Seina.

"Seina-san. Could you step away from Fuku-chan a little?"

"Y-yes."

Seina did as he was told and moved a little distance away from Fuku.

"Myaa, myaa!"

Fuku tried to chase after Seina, struggling to move. Just then, the access value began to drop gradually.

"Seina-san, could you look away and turn around for a moment?"

"Myaa! Myaa! Myaa!"

The moment Seina looked away, Fuku let out a worried meow. And the access value began to drop sharply.

"Okay. I'm sorry, Fuku-chan."

Neeju hugged her and stroked her gently, and Fuku licked Neeju's cheek as if reassured.

"So even when she's in the center, her access values can still fluctuate."

"So, it all comes down to Fuku's mood, after all…"

"Or rather, perhaps it's better to say it depends on her level of concentration. Anyway, we'll have to train Fuku-chan to stay on the table from now on, but we need to come up with a temporary solution for the time being."

Kiriko watched Fuku wagging her tail as she darted back and forth between Seina and Neeju, and she gave a faint smile, though a look of confusion also flashed in her eyes.

(I guess I'm the one who has to be the strict one, after all.)

Having made up her mind, Kiriko began rechecking the system.

Chapter Five: Fuku · Vacation in the Ship

Dododododododododododododododo, bam! Bang! Bang!

It was a sound unlike anything of this world. It sent a chill down the spines of everyone present, a sound that could easily give a faint-hearted person a heart attack.

Seto and Kuisu, their hair disheveled, drenched in sweat, their costumes stained and torn in

places, rushed onto the Mikagami's bridge, their faces showing desperate fear. It was a state of panic their subordinates had never seen before. Many others witnessed Seto and Kuisu's arrival, but not a single person laughed at their plight. That was because Gyokuren was chasing after them like a demon god.

"Yaaaah!"

Even Misaki, who had been excited to see her mother in such a comical state said, "Gyo-gyo-gyo-gyo-Gyokuren-chan is scary onee-sama~~" and clung to Funaho in panic.

Seto and Kuisu unlocked the cage left on Mikagami's bridge and jumped inside. Then, at the last possible moment, they slammed the cage shut. Gyokuren, who had charged forward regardless of the bars closing, crashed into it with a tremendous bang and finally came to a stop. The hand thrust through the bars had stopped just a few centimeters from Seto, almost reaching her.

This was the source of the sound that echoed through the bridge.

"Haa, haa, haa." Gyokuren, who had been glaring intently at Seto's face, breathing heavily, tears welling in the corners of her eyes, suddenly relaxed.

"Oh, what a pity. I was so close." Then she flashed a sinister, chilling smile.

At that moment, the strength drained from Seto and Kuisu's legs, and they collapsed, slumping down onto the ground.

"W-wait, I just… went a little."

"Me too… That last look was the scariest…"

"It's been ages since I've been through something this terrifying~~"

"In a different sense, Ringo-chan was scary too, though."

"Well, in Gyokuren-chan's case, it was a matter of life and death."

"Oh, Seto-sama. Ringo-chan's frugality can be life-threatening too, if you're not careful. Like, starving to death."

The two seemed surprisingly calm, but this was really just a way to catch their breath after the exertion. For now, they needed to escape the reality in front of them and calm their minds.

"Well then, would you mind telling us the reason now?"

By then, Gyokuren had completely returned to her usual self.

"Yes, yes, of course!"

Seto and Kuisu nodded with the energy of a hummingbird's wingbeat.

Relieved to be freed from the heavy atmosphere, Minaho gave the operators a nod. They

began their work as quietly as possible, and Mikagami also moved away from port as slowly as possible.

Around that time, Kamidake had just landed on a large freshwater lake on the planet designated as the relay point.

“Myaa, myaa!”

Perhaps because she liked the water, Fuku was being held by Neeju and was happily frolicking. In stark contrast, however, Seina, Kiriko, and the others were studying the data they had gathered along the way and discussing it with serious expressions.

“So, basically, no matter where Fuku is on the ship, we can at least maintain this minimum value.”

“Still, at these control values, we can barely fly. If we get caught in a battle, we won’t be able to do anything.”

Kiriko glanced at the NB, which was scorched in places and billowing white smoke.

“What’s the matter? If you have something to say, just say it clearly.”

“Useless.”

Amane spoke bluntly, taking over for Kiriko, who breathed sigh.

“It’s not my fault! It’s not my fault that little animal rejected me!”

Kiriko and the others had tried to use NB as a control relay, but Fuku had vehemently objected and refused.

“Well, I guess… I wouldn’t want some insensitive jerk like you messing with my body either.”

“That’s true.”

Kiriko and Elma nodded deeply.

“I’m sorry about that.”

“Now, now. We have other plans for NB, so please cheer up.”

“Other plans?”

“That’s right. We can’t separate navigation, weapons control, and sensors from Kamidake, but it would be a big help if NB could handle the data processing.”

“Me?”

“You’re the best computer this ship has to offer. At the very least, you’re definitely the best

we can get right now, including on this planet.”

“I'm counting on you, NB.”

“M-Master... I'll do my best!”

Seina's words must have made NB incredibly happy, because he started to get just as excited as Fuku.

“He’s surprisingly simple-minded.”

“Well, he was in danger of being fired, after all.”

With wry smiles, Amane and Elma leaned close to each other and whispered, making sure NB couldn’t hear.

“Even so, it’s still unclear whether he’ll be able to handle the situation. So, let’s prepare a few customized versions tailored to the situation and switch between them as needed.”

“Hey, do you need Seina’s help with that?” Seeing that the discussion had concluded, Neeju approached them.

“No, we can handle this on our own. It won’t take that long anyway… Why do you ask?”

“I want to play with Fuku-chan. I really think it’s important to have a good balance in things like this. Of course, I don’t think it’ll solve everything right away.” Neeju smiled brightly.

“I understand. I’ll leave it to you.”

“Well then, big brother, let’s go.”

“Go? Where?”

“Since we have such an amazing fixed subspace, we should use it. Fuku-chan seems to like water, so let’s go to the ocean zone.”

“Myaa!” Fuku meowed as if to agree with Neeju.

“Okay, let's do that. I'm sorry, but I'll leave the rest to you.” Seina bowed to Kiriko and the others, then headed towards the transfer gate with Neeju.

“The ocean... This is my chance!” After seeing the two off, Amane smiled broadly.

“What’s up?”

“I was just thinking we should wrap this up quickly so we can take a break too.”

Kamidake’s Four Seasons Space featured distinct terrain for each season.

Spring was a place centered around flatlands; summer, a place dotted with islands centered around the sea; autumn, gentle hills and highlands; and winter, mountains centered around steep peaks.

However, the seasons in each space weren't fixed; each one properly cycled through the seasons on an annual cycle. And although the zones were separate, they maintained continuity with one another, creating a single, fully self-sustaining cycle. In other words, the environment could be maintained without any artificial assistance. Furthermore, it also served as a food production facility tailored to each terrain and environment.

"...So it's just the same as an Imperial Ship, only with a different shape... Still..." Seina said and looked up from the manual, gazing skyward.

"The World Tree on an Imperial Ship is amazing, but this view is pretty extraordinary too."

The four spaces were compressed into a plate-like shape and arranged like a set of rectangular prisms facing each other, so above, the other three spaces were visible, faintly blending into the blue sky.

"I suppose this is a spectacular view in its own right…"

For a moment, Seina felt as if he might be sucked in. No, he had the illusion that he was actually floating in the sky and might fall into it, so he quickly turned his gaze toward the sea. He was currently on an island about ten meters above sea level, located in a coastal zone consisting solely of a sandy beach stretching about a kilometer around its perimeter and a grove of palm trees.

The sight of large beach umbrellas planted on the wide sandy beach, cloth picnic blankets spread out, a sports bag filled with a cooler and various necessities, and inflated inner tubes and beach balls scattered haphazardly around, it felt just like a typical Japanese family day at the beach. And with Seina sitting there, it was a scene that felt a bit out of place against the beautiful marine-blue sea reminiscent of a luxury resort in the South.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, big brother." Neeju said shyly as she emerged from the teleportation gate, holding Fuku in her arms.

"Myaa! Myaa!"

Neeju hesitated over whether to put Fuku down, as she was eager to go to Seina. Part of the reason she was holding Fuku was to hide her swimsuit. Although Neeju was the one who suggested going to the beach, once she actually changed into her swimsuit, she found it a little embarrassing to be seen by a man.

"Myaa! Myaa!"

"I see. You want to go see big brother soon, don't you?" Neeju made up her mind and gently set Fuku down on the sandy beach.

"Myaa! Myaa!"

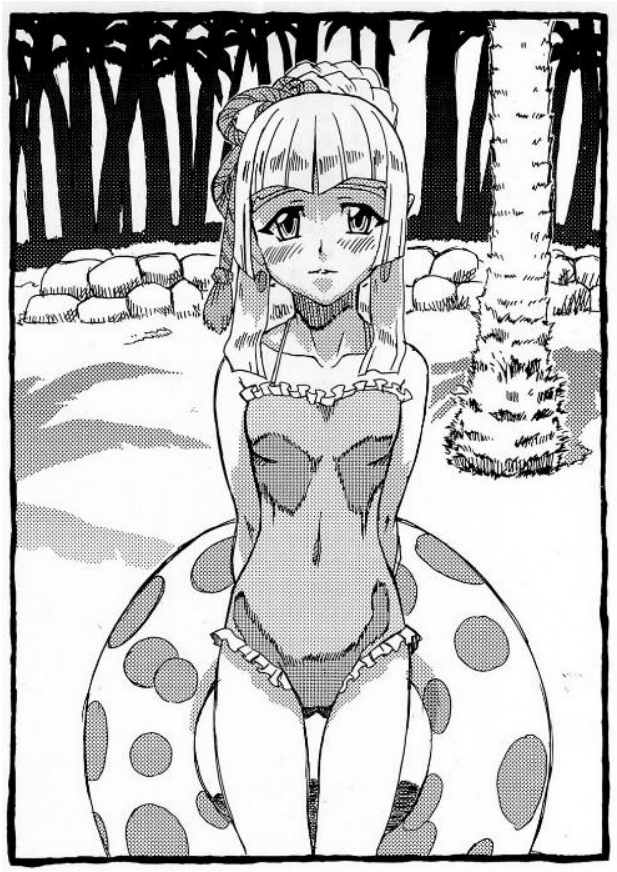
Fuku, still a newborn, could barely manage to wobble along. Though she was eager, she couldn't quite make it to Seina. Still, watching Seina's smiling face, Fuku walked as fast as she could.

Neeju used Fuku's slow pace as a moment to gather her own courage.

"Myaa!"

"Good job, Fuku!" When Fuku finally made it, Seina rewarded her with a smile, a hug, and a gentle pat on the head.

Of course, for Fuku, that was the greatest reward of all.



"……Big brother."

Waiting until Fuku was satisfied and had settled down, Neeju spoke to Seina. With a slightly bashful smile, Neeju had her hair tied back and was wearing a pink one-piece swimsuit.

"!"

Seeing her like that, Seina felt a sudden pang in his chest.

It reminded him of when his younger sister, Yoshiko, was still a child and wanted to play with Seina. Perhaps she was so thrilled with the new clothes she'd gone shopping for with their mother that she came to show them to their father, and then to Seina as well. But just as Seina approached Yoshiko to praise her, a stone kicked up by a passing car's tire struck Seina in the forehead, cutting him. And that spurt of blood had left a red stain on Yoshiko's brand-new clothes, as if someone had sprayed them with a red mist. Of course, Yoshiko didn't blame Seina for staining her clothes, she was too worried about Seina's injury. But from that day on, she never came to show Seina her favorite clothes again, and Seina lost the chance to say the words he had been about to tell Yoshiko at that moment, forever.

"Yeah. It looks great on you." Seina said gently, glancing around cautiously.

Seeing the look of joy light up Neeju's face , Seina felt as if the regret he'd carried since childhood had finally been lifted.

"Let's go!" Neeju grabbed Seina's arm and tugged at him, urging him on.

Seina stood up, holding Fuku in one arm, and started running toward the water's edge. Taken off guard for a moment, Neeju quickly followed suit and started running after Seina.

"Wait, big brother!"

Seina felt a sense of comfort hearing Neeju's voice and sensing her following behind him. It was a scene between siblings that would have been a daily occurrence in their childhood, had it not been for Seina's bad luck.

When Seina reached the water's edge, he gently set Fuku down on the sand, where she was kicking her legs at the sight of the approaching waves.

"Come to think of it, can you swim, Neeju-chan?" Seina asked Neeju, who had caught up to him, while keeping his eyes on Fuku.

"This is my first time at a beach with waves. But today, Fuku-chan is the star." Neeju gazed fondly at Fuku, who was playing a game of tag with the waves.

"Myan. Myan. Mya-gyaah!!"

Just then, Fuku was suddenly swept up by a large (at least for her) wave that came out of nowhere. Tossed about by the waves, and after the backwash receded, Fuku was struggling with her head half-buried in the sand churned up by the current.

"Fuku, are you okay!?"

Seina quickly scooped Fuku up. Her face was covered in sand, and she looked dazed, but the next moment, she started meowing happily. Then, she began flapping her limbs as if she wanted to go back toward the waves.

"Myaa! Myaa! Myaa!"

"Huh? You want to go over there?"

He set Fuku down on the sand, looking puzzled at her somewhat frenzied behavior. The moment he did, Fuku began wobbling toward the waves. Then, as she charged into the surf, she was swept up by the waves just like before, and seemed to be enjoying the sensation of her body being buried in the sand.

"H-hey, Fuku… isn't that a bit of a dangerous game?"

"Come to think of it, does Fuku-chan breathe?"

"Huh? …Oh, right. Fuku is a spaceship, isn't she?" Seina frantically searched the manual.

"But this manual only covers facility information…" Seina searched high and low, but couldn't find anything relevant.

"Big brother, in situations like this, you're supposed to check the 'Frequently Asked Questions'."

“Huh? Even if you say 'FAQ,' this ship isn't some mass-produced appliance... Oh, there it is!”

“See? I told you it was there.” Neeju wore a proud smile.

“Um… there it is! ‘Supplementary Main Unit Specifications’, this is it!”

Full of anticipation, he opened the section, but it contained only a few lines:

——Basically, if she doesn’t want to eat, she doesn’t have to; if she doesn’t want to breathe, she doesn’t have to; and in her normal state, she can even withstand a direct nuclear blast! Plus, from absolute zero to the surface temperature of the sun, she’s totally fine, she’s not a weapon, after all ♡

“……How am I supposed to interpret this?”

“So, basically, it means you don’t have to worry about the small stuff, I mean, she’ll be fine, right?”

“Is that amazing, or just ridiculous?”

“Well, Hakubi Washu is famous for being an extremely eccentric person.”

“I heard all sorts of things about that from the people at the Academy...”

“Anyway, as long as Fuku-chan is having fun, I guess that’s all that matters.”

Watching Fuku play in the waves, Seina and Neeju spoke to each other as if talking to themselves.

“Mya! Myaaaaa!!”

Like a fish washed up on the shore, Fuku splashed about, sending water flying everywhere as she played with such obvious delight, it was a rather bizarre sight.

Just then, “Seina, there you are!”

“Huh? Amane…!!!”

Suddenly, Amane’s voice rang out, and Seina, who had turned around, froze in place.

Under the hot tropical sun stood Amane, Elma, and Kiriko, all wearing daring swimsuits. Then, as if to tease him, they began walking toward Seina slowly, their movements designed to show off their figures.

As a former top model, Amane knew exactly how to make herself look her best. In contrast to Gyokuren, whose alluring charm was amplified under the moonlight, Amane’s healthy, radiant beauty was amplified under the sun. Amane, whose beauty was already breathtaking,

had completely made this beautiful southern landscape her own backdrop. It felt as though she were the very embodiment of “The Birth of Venus.”

But the other two weren’t to be outdone. Elma’s white fur glistened like silver in the strong sunlight, and her feline, supple physique was beautiful. Moreover, her pure white bikini blended so seamlessly with her white fur that for a moment, one might mistake her for being naked.

Finally, there was Kiriko. Her beautiful black hair, fair, smooth skin, and toned physique, paired with a bright red bikini, created a look that was both elegant and alluring. But above all, the sight of her shyly covering her body with her hands was incredibly provocative. If she had remained composed, he might have been able to handle the situation, but as if Kiriko’s embarrassment had spread to him, Seina’s face turned bright red as well.

“……”

Realizing Amane and the other girls’ intentions, Neeju glanced down at her chest and looked a bit upset. But she quickly looked up and smiled brightly,

“Big sisters, what about your work?” She asked, trying to sound as cheerful as possible and pretending to be a completely innocent child.

For a split second, she considered calling them “old ladies”, but calling these beautiful women in front of her that would have sounded like she was just making excuses for her defeat.

“Everything’s going smoothly, so don’t worry, Your Highness.”

Seeing Seina and Neeju’s reactions, Amane smiled contentedly and pushed Kiriko, who was hiding behind her, forward.

“Ah, Amane!”

“Come on, Kiriko, why don’t you just give in already?”

“That’s right, Kiriko-san.”

Elma also grabbed Kiriko’s arm as she tried to hide her face. With both arms restrained by the two of them, Kiriko found her body exposed before Seina.

“Ah, ahhh…”

Her experiences on Jurai had, to no small extent, influenced Kiriko’s feelings toward Seina.

When they first met, Seina was just a small child, forced into a quiet, secluded life due to his bad luck, gazing up at the sky from his tiny box. But that bad luck had given Seina the great assets of patience and experience. Now, having found a stage to shine on in space, he was about to bloom into a magnificent flower. What made him witness and truly realize this was the incident with Seto’s package, the warm welcome in Jurai, and this extraordinary ship.

Of course, Seina was still inexperienced and needed the help of many people, but in space,

there were many who highly valued his bad luck, and the patience and experience he had cultivated. Kiriko realized that Seina had at least flown from under her protective wing and was now walking the path of independence. The reason she agreed to Amane's proposal this time was because she had a latent desire to be seen as a woman rather than just a ward, but the fear of admitting that still loomed large.

"Uh, um, um…"

Knowing someone well could be both an accelerator and, at times, a brake. Because she could clearly see Seina's confusion, she couldn't bring herself to take decisive action.

Just then, Kiriko realized something that was both a perfect opportunity to change the subject and a matter of great importance.

"Um, Seina-chan, what about Fuku-chan?"

"Huh!?" Seina looked sharply at the spot where Fuku should have been, but she wasn't there.

Fortunately, the sand was white.

"What!?"

As Seina tried to jump to his feet, his face pale with shock, he caught a glimpse out of the corner of his eye of something black and round, resembling a sea urchin, being washed by the waves. It was only a moment later that he realized it was Fuku's tail.

"Fuku! Fuku!!"

As everyone realized what was happening and rushed over, Seina dug into the sand, grabbed her tail, and pulled her out as if he were pulling up a carrot.

Fuku was pulled out smoothly with a "pop," and her perfectly round eyes snapped open. Then, when she looked at Seina's face, she burst into a joyful laugh.

"……"

"Big brother, Fuku-chan is still upside down."

Neeju snatched Fuku from the dumbfounded Seina and peered down at her, her head now facing upward.

"Fuku-chan, are you okay!?"

"Myaa! Myaaaan!"

Ignoring Neeju's worried gaze, Fuku kicked her legs and leaped out of her hands. Then, just like before, she began playing in the waves.

"Hey, Seina. Does this girl have a death wish or something?" Amane asked with a look of exasperation.

Seina silently showed her the manual entry he'd found earlier.

"……Kiriko, what do you think?" Furrowing her brow, Amane looked over at Kiriko.

"Even if you ask me what I think… I can only interpret what I see."

"So, physically speaking, she's in pretty good shape, then?"

"Physically… huh?"

"Which means her future education is going to be a real challenge."

Amane and the others exchanged glances and breathed a deep sigh.

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About two hours later, Seina and Neeju were building a sandcastle about as tall as Seina. Fuku seemed to enjoy digging holes there and was busily digging holes all over the place. Eventually, she ended up collapsing the structure, and Seina and Neeju repeated the process of rebuilding the castle from scratch without getting bored. Of course, the structure, which had been complex at first, gradually became simpler, and eventually turned into nothing more than a pile of sand.

As for Amane and the others, they had set up several large umbrellas nearby to create shade and were lying around lazily beneath them.

Amane, in particular, would occasionally roll over, waiting for the moment Seina glanced her way to make gestures like adjusting her swimsuit or emphasizing her chest. She enjoyed watching Seina shyly look away and Neeju momentarily frown at the sight.

Neeju, however, wasn't about to be outdone. Using Fuku as an excuse, she'd cling to Seina or act all sweet, skillfully maneuvering Seina into a position where he'd have his back turned to Amane and the others.

Watching this silent battle between the two, Kiriko, lying next to them, adopted a "mind your

Amane and the others had created some shade with several parasols, and they were sprawled lazily underneath them.
Amane, in particular, turned over every now and then, as she waited for the moment that Seina would look her way.
Then she would pretend to adjust her bathing suit and move in ways to accentuate her breasts.
And then she enjoyed the sight of Seina averting his eyes in embarrassment, and Neju becoming furious in an instant.

own business" attitude with a puzzled expression.

Still, perhaps annoyed by Neeju's provocation, she said, "Seina-chan, Neeju-sama. Are you thirsty?" She offered Amane some backup.

"Oh, right. Well then, Neeju-chan, shall we take a little break?"

"U-uh, sure."

Even though she realized this was Kiriko's scheme, Neeju, concerned for Seina's well-being as he put up with this heat, nodded obediently. Of course, it was also true that Neeju herself was starting to feel the strain.

"You need to refuel during a battle, right?" She muttered as she picked up Fuku and headed toward Kiriko, passing Seina along the way.

"Thanks, big sis."

Neeju took the tropical drink from Kiriko, quickly handed it to Seina as he walked over, and took the one Kiriko was about to give to Seina.

"Now, now, calm down." Elma patted Kiriko's shoulder gently as she frowned.

"Hehe. She was a little better than us, wasn't she?" Amane sat up and laughed as well.

"But the real battle is just beginning. Hey, Fuku!" Amane called out, a carrot was dangling

from her hand, she must have gotten it ready without anyone noticing.

“Mya? Myaa??”

“Fuku-chan!?”

Fuku slipped out of Neeju’s arms and ran over to Amane. Then she began sniffing the carrot dangling right in front of her nose.

Chomp! Fuku suddenly bit into the carrot. After biting off about a centimeter from the tip, Fuku’s expression grew increasingly blissful as she chewed.

“……Fu, fumyaaaaan!”

Fuku took the carrot in her mouth again and this time began to suck on it like a kitten drinking milk.

“Since Ryo-chan likes carrots, I had a hunch this might happen...”

“Seeing her like this, it really hits home that she’s just a baby.”

“She’s so cute.”

Watching Fuku, Kiriko and the others couldn’t help but break into smiles. Seina and Neeju were no exception. Forgetting all the back-and-forth from earlier, everyone stared intently at Fuku.

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Whether it was because her belly was full or because she had settled down, Fuku fell asleep, breathing peacefully.

“Neeju-chan, we still have time, what do you think we should do?” Seina spoke softly to Neeju, who was holding Fuku.

He was asking if they should let Fuku sleep and continue playing.

“I’ve had enough fun for now. I want to discuss what we’re going to do next with my older sisters, so please watch over Fuku-chan.”

“Huh? But…”

“They’ll will take care of the beach gear.” She said as she glanced briefly at Kiriko and the others.

“Yes, leave it to us. Besides, we’ll need time for our hair and skin aftercare, and we can’t really do that while holding Fuku-chan, can we?”

Hearing Elma’s words, Kiriko and Amane nodded.

“Oh, Neeju-chan. About the room… since there’s an official guest house, I want to check a few

things before we move there. So…"

"I'd prefer the house we used yesterday. …I mean, I don't like sleeping alone in a place that's too big." Neeju looked at Seina with a lonely expression.

"If that's what you want, Neeju-chan, I'm fine with it. Well then, I'll wait for you at that house."

"Okay!"

"I'm going to head back first with Fuku, so please take care of things after I leave."

"Leave it to me."

Seina took Fuku from Neeju and headed straight for the teleportation gate.

"What do you want to talk about?" Kiriko asked Neeju once she was sure Seina was out of sight.

"Let's take care of this first, girls."

As if to deflect that enthusiasm, Neeju pointed at the beach gear.

Seina passed through the air shower room, which resembled a hallway with white walls on all sides, and returned to the multipurpose changing room where he had changed into his swimsuit.

"Is that really all it takes to remove foreign particles?"

Even though Fuku was being held by Seina, the fine sand that had gotten into her fur had been removed as well. Using a bath towel from the waiting room as a makeshift blanket, he laid Fuku down on the sofa, then went into the nearest locker room, quickly changed, and came back out.

"Master, it's an emergency! An emergency!"

Just as Seina was about to approach Fuku, NB suddenly burst out of the teleportation gate, shouting at the top of his lungs.

"!!"

Seina instinctively scooped up NB and darted into the same locker he'd used earlier. It was soundproofed, after all.

"Don't shout! You'll wake Fuku up!"

"What? Is Fuku asleep? Then I'm sorry about that."

"More importantly, weren't you supposed to be on the bridge?"

Despite hearing that it was an emergency, Seina remained calm. In an emergency, NB should have communicated via radio.

“I’m done with the adjustments, so there’s no reason I have to be there. Anyway, I heard those three idiots have escaped.”

“Those three idiots? You mean Alan-san and the other two? But ‘escaped’? It’s only been about three days since we parted ways.”

“Well, listen. It seems they’ve been using info on Master and Amane-han as bait to raise money from all sorts of tabloid reporters.”

“Money... you mean escape funds?”

“Well, I guess they don't have any cash on them anyway.”

“But our information...”

“Exactly! It’s top-secret stuff. And since they can’t act openly , they apparently sweet-talked fellow trainees into handling the procedures. Like where to transfer the money and getting prepaid cards. On top of that!”

“‘On top of that’… wait, there’s more?”

“They swindled the trainees and took their money too.”

“……A-Alan-san…”

Even Seina was left speechless by such villainy. At this point, there was no room for sympathy, and as Tennyo had told him before, trying to defend them clumsily would only end up hurting Alan and the others.

“But come on, is it really that easy to just escape like that? And quitting the GP while saddled with such a massive debt…”

“It’s suicide… If they get caught, they’ll be sent straight to a correctional facility. Well, that’s probably why they have no intention of going back… to the Galactic Federation.”

“Does that mean, !”

That meant becoming an outlaw, in other words, a pirate.

“As long as they don’t get caught, they won’t have to pay their debts! Well, that’s exactly the kind of thing those three… no, that idiot Alan would come up with. As for the escape, security’s way too lax compared to the last time with Kamidake. Besides, there’s no point in a trainee pulling off a full-scale escape. That’s probably why that musclehead wasn’t on high alert either. Apparently, just a few hours after leaving the dorms at the port of call, they escaped the colony on a smuggling ship.”

“Even if it’s a smuggling ship, is it really that easy to find one?”

“A snake knows the ways of a snake. Well, no matter where you go, the methods for making connections with those kinds of people don’t really change much. Still, to find one of those in such a short time and make a getaway, that’s just the brute strength of an idiot, ha ha ha ha.”

“This isn’t a laughing matter… A smuggling ship? Who knows what’ll happen once they get there…”

“If they’d thought that far ahead, they wouldn’t be in this mess. They brought this on themselves! No sympathy! You’d better forget about it quickly. Either way, all we can do is pray for their safety.”

“...You’re right. I just hope they get caught safely before any danger comes their way…”

“Yeah... but those three have strangely good luck, so I think they’ll be fine.”

Just as NB said, they would later have an unexpected reunion with Alan and the other two.

After finishing up, Kiriko and the girls walked through the air shower corridor and emerged into a waiting room larger than the men’s. The difference from Seina was that from here, they headed to the bathing area before changing.

With Neeju leading the way, the four of them entered the changing room and began taking off their swimsuits.

“Can I help you?” Kiriko asked after noticing that Neeju, having taken off her swimsuit, was struggling to remove her hair clip.

“Yes, please.”

Standing behind Neeju, Kiriko removed the hair clip for her.

“You were trying to do this all by yourself earlier?”

“There is actually a machine here that can do that for you.”

“Really…?!”

For a moment, Kiriko looked puzzled. If there was a setup machine, there would be no need to go to the trouble of undoing her hair herself. But she quickly discovered her intention.

“That pattern!?”

In the spot previously hidden by her hair was the same pattern found on the official documents issued by the priestesses of Melmas.

“You knew my name from the start, didn’t you? You just couldn’t tell if I was the real thing or a fake, so you couldn’t quite grasp Seto-sama’s intentions…”

“Are you the real one?”

“My name is Neeju Na Melmas. I am the rightful Shrine Maiden of Melmas.” Neeju’s expression and tone changed abruptly.

“How dare you stand so high before this Shrine Maiden! Kneel!!”

“!!?”

At Neeju’s commanding voice, Kiriko and the others dropped to one knee and knelt. But it was by no means of their own volition.

“What!?? My body… won’t move?”

Kiriko and the girls stared at the floor in shock.

“Heh.”

Neeju looked down at Kiriko and the others with an air of authority, and the atmosphere of the room had transformed into that of a cathedral.

“Eek!!”

But Kiriko suddenly let out a strange, high-pitched scream that didn’t fit the mood of the moment.

“What’s wrong, Kiriko!?”

Amane, who had managed to move her head just a little with all her might despite her paralyzed body, saw Neeju crouched down, poking Kiriko’s chest with an intrigued look on her face.

“W-what the, ??”

“Such fine, smooth skin. And such beautiful, jet-black hair.”

As Neeju stood up, she gently ran her fingers through Kiriko’s black hair as if dipping her hand into a clear stream, then approached Amane.

“Oh, so you can move your head after all.” Neeju placed a hand on Amane’s cheek.

“There isn’t a single shrine maiden in my sanctuary who possesses such beauty. And besides…”

With that, Neeju crouched down in front of Amane, “You’re quite voluptuous, aren’t you… and your figure is simply stunning.”

And then, she began kneading Amane’s breasts with both hands, as if she were kneading bread dough. At that moment, there wasn’t a shred of dignity left on Neeju’s face; she just looked utterly dumbfounded.

“H-hey. My breasts aren’t bread dough, you know.”

“Hmph!” Neeju roughly pulled her hands away and went over to Elma next.

“Such beautiful white hair. It’s just like silver.”

“Ah, thank you.”

“It would feel nice to have a fur rug like this, wouldn’t it?”

“P-please, don’t skin me!”

Elma tried desperately to move her body to escape, but she remained kneeling where she was, unable to move a muscle.

“I’m not a cold-blooded dictator! I was just saying it would be nice to have a fur rug like this.”

“I-I’m sorry.”

“Hmm. Perhaps I’ll have you sleep by my side next time. Naturally, that includes Seina-dono as well.”

“W-well… that might be nice.”

“Ahahahaha! I’m looking forward to it.”

“Elma, what are you talking about?!”

“Heh heh, you seem quite composed. Just as I’d expect from those assigned to Seina-dono. You all have remarkable mental fortitude.”

Neeju stepped in front of them, then slowly turned to face them. The moment she did, Kiriko and the others regained control of their bodies.

“What the!?”

Kiriko and the girls checked their bodies in puzzlement. Then, seeking an answer, they glared at Neeju.

“I can control a group’s collective consciousness. That said, I can only steer them in a certain direction to a degree, but with a small group, it works just as you’ve just experienced.”

“Is that why you reign as a Shrine Maiden?”

“Reign? …Really, I am nothing more than a puppet. A puppet of those in power who make the decisions. The reason my body is trapped in this juvenile form is simply because it makes me easier to control. Well, to the outside world, it’s presented as a means to preserve my virginity and maintain my abilities.”

“I’ve heard there’s no record of Neeju-sama ever leaving Melmas?”

“The reason I came here was to assess Seina-dono’s abilities. The reason I’m telling you this is so you won’t get in my way.”

Kiriko’s question wasn’t about that purpose; she was asking how Neeju had come to Jurai. If

Neeju was a puppet, there was a possibility she had come to Jurai either at someone else's behest or through Seto's illegal machinations. Naturally, depending on the reason, they'd have to change how we handled the situation. But Neeju evaded the question.

(So, the implication is that since those details don't concern us, there's no need to pry…)

Realizing this, Kiriko and the girls gave up on pressing the matter further and focused their attention on Neeju's words.

"...Seina-chan, no, the captain's ability?"

Seina's ability had already been identified as an abnormal bias in probability. But the fact that they went so far as to call Neeju in to verify it further meant there was some significance to it.

"……No way!?"

Kiriko and the others understood the implication at the same time.

"Such clever girls… Is the ability to draw pirates in due to an extreme bias in probability? Or is it the result of some other supernatural power? Is it intentional, or not? I have been asked to investigate that."

"Whether it's intentional or not… Does that mean it's the same power as Neeju-sama?"

"Hmph… Quite so. If the probability bias caused by Seina-dono can be deliberately controlled, he will be placed under quarantine and supervision, just like me. After all, there is a difference between a natural disaster and terrorism."

"What?! Is that Seto-sama's intention?"

"Sooner or later, someone will notice. To ensure Seina-dono isn't conveniently silenced when that happens, conducting an investigation in advance is what will protect Seina-dono. At least within the Galactic Federation, no one with abilities surpassing mine has been confirmed. Therefore, overturning my findings would be nearly impossible, wouldn't it?"

"But what if the findings…"

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. However, we must avoid being caught off guard by our enemies. You understand what I mean, don't you?"

There were surprisingly many high-ranking officials with vested interests tied to the pirates. Having been told this much, Kiriko and the others had no choice but to nod in agreement.

"And one more thing. To conduct that investigation, it is necessary to observe from close to Seina-dono. Since I cannot have you lot getting in the way, I have revealed everything."

"So, for Neeju-sama, being here is the reward?"

"Hmph, well, this is your reward for getting the answer right. As you surmised, the goal of this

operation is to eradicate my adversaries. After all, puppets are destined to be discarded once they're no longer needed… Having been at the heart of politics for so long, I'm aware of all sorts of inconvenient truths, and my political influence has grown too large for them to ignore."

"That damn old hag, she just keeps dumping all her troublesome tasks on me..."

"Seto-dono is supposed to be waiting at our destination, so feel free to complain to her when you see her. Well, that's enough chatter for now…" With that, Neeju flashed a smile and said, "I've got to hurry up and take a bath, then go see my big brother♡"

With her expression and manner of speaking reverting to those of a child, Neeju headed toward the large bath with a light step.

"……As long as Seto-sama is involved, I get the feeling it's dangerous to take her words at face value."

"I agree." the other two said in unison, in response to Amane's words.

"We can't take those words at face value."

Gyokuren, who had been listening to Seto and Kuisu's explanation, stared intently at them with a blank expression and voiced the same sentiment as Kiriko and the girls.

"But Gyokuren, investigating Seina-san is something we have to do. Besides, if the situation were as worrying as you think, Kiriko and the others wouldn't just stand by and watch, would they?"

Seeing Seto trembling, perhaps feeling sorry for her, Karen suppressed her own fear and spoke to Gyokuren.

"……You're right. It seems we have no choice but to rely on Kiriko-sama and the others for now." Gyokuren quickly turned on her heel and headed toward the teleportation gate.

"Gyokuren, where are you going?"

"Seto-sama. I'm going to borrow your room." Gyokuren said, ignoring Karen's question, as she vanished into the teleportation gate.

"Gyokuren?"

"She went to access NB. My room has a direct line, you see."

"I see! Hakuren, Suiren, let's go too!" With a quick bow to Seto and Kuisu, Karen and the group followed Gyokuren.

"……Ahhh, that was scary."

Seto and Kuisu emerged on all fours, staggering and looking completely exhausted. Still in

that position, they both took deep breaths.

Then, “Heave-ho,” Kuisu stood up, groaning like an old man. Then, moving her body lightly as if to loosen her stiff muscles, she began walking lazily toward the teleportation gate.

“Good job.”

“I’m really exhausted.” Kuisu replied to Seto with a grumble, then vanished into the teleportation gate without even looking back at Seto.

Watching her go, Seto, still on all fours, crawled up onto her usual couch-like throne and sat down.

“You lot, how dare you betray me.”

“What exactly do you expect us to do against an opponent Seto-sama can’t handle?”

“That bearded brute, couldn’t he have bought us a little more time?”

“No matter what you say, you can't go against an angry Gyokuren-chan. Besides, it seems that having incidents like this occasionally helps prevent dementia.”

“I’ll break before I get senile!”

“It’s your own fault.”

Judging that the conversation would just be a repetitive back-and-forth, the operator quickly ended the conversation.

“You could have stuck with me a little longer.”

Light exercise after a long workout, venting after mental fatigue, that was the way it went. To achieve mental stability, she wanted to let off a little more steam.

“Kamidake has reached the halfway point, so the first report has come in.”

“Huh! I’ll read it, I’ll read it!!”

Reports related to Kamidake were the best medicine for Seto right now. To savor them slowly, she headed to a secluded room on the bridge, accessible only to Seto and a select few close associates.

“Myaaan. Fumya, fumya, fumyaaaa…”

Just as Seina and NB finished their conversation and emerged from the changing room, they heard Fuku meowing, searching for Seina.

“Huh, is she awake?”

Noticing Fuku's voice, Seina hurried over in a panic.

"Fumya, fumya!"

Perhaps feeling lonely, Fuku, with tears welling up in the corners of her eyes, clung to Seina's outstretched hand.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry. It must be scary to wake up alone in a strange place."

"Master, you really understand how a little kid feels, don't you?"

"……The first time I was seriously injured and hospitalized, I woke up in the hospital… and there was no one there at the time. My wounds hurt, and I felt so alone that I just cried and cried…"

"M-Master…"

Seeing Fuku being held and stroked, and seeing that image overlap with Seina's childhood, NB couldn't say anything else.

"Mya?"

Fuku, who had been clinging to Seina, though NB didn't realize when she'd stopped crying, suddenly began staring intently at NB.

"What's wrong? You're not going to fight anymore."

But contrary to Seina's expectations, Fuku began wagging her tail happily. Then she started holding out her front paws toward NB.

"Do you want to go to NB?" Seina said, looking puzzled, looked back and forth between NB and Fuku and said.

"Myaa! Myaa!"

"Okay, okay."

Seina picked up Fuku so he could stop her immediately if anything happened, and slowly moved her closer to NB.

"Myaaan!"

Ignoring Seina's worries, Fuku rubbed her cheek against NB, showing her affection.

"But she hated you so much on the bridge."

"Back then, there was that whole eggshell incident, so maybe she was just a little worked up."

"If you're getting along, that's for the best. Well then, let's head home and take a bath." Seina said as he placed Fuku on top of NB while petting her head.

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“Sorry to keep you waiting, big bro…”

Neeju walked into the house and noticed Fuku and NB glaring at each other, and Seina looking on with a troubled expression.

“Fumyaaaaa!”

“You’re a million years too early to challenge me, you little critter.”

As Fuku bristled her fur in a threatening display, NB’s outer shell turned a bright red warning color.

Neeju slowly approached Seina from a distance.

“...Another fight?”

“No, they got along really well in the locker room. But then, when I was in the bath at home with Fuku, NB came in and it was like this...”

“Hmm... I bet she didn't want a ball or something getting in the way while she was with her big brother.”

“I’m not a ball! I was assisting Master long before this little animal came along! Washing Master’s back is my right!” NB yelled while keeping his gaze fixed on Fuku, to avoid being attacked while off guard.

“If you're going to say that, then it should be ‘duty,’ right?”

“Yes, yes, it's an obligation, an obligation!”

“Big brother, did NB always wash your back for you?”

“I’m not a kid, I can do it myself… Ah… no, wait, at least I’ve never had NB wash my back.”

Seina quickly changed the subject. It was purely because he judged it to be inappropriate for Neeju’s upbringing.

“Has anyone else done it?”

“Yesterday, Neeju-chan did it for me.”

“So you’ve had Kiriko-san and the others, or those ladies-in-waiting, do it for you, then?”

But that was the tragedy of being honest… Neeju saw right through him.

“That’s right! They always, always ignore me…”

“……I thought it was a weird NB from the moment I first saw it… but this customization wasn’t done by you, was it?”

“Well, it’s a bit of everything...”

“Why don’t you just reset it? It’s definitely got some weird bugs.”

“You little brat! How dare you say such a terrible thing! You NB killer!”

“That’s a strangely intense reaction. I kind of get why Fuku-chan would hate it.”

“Airi-san re-calibrated it for me, so I don’t think there are any bugs.”

“Airi, you mean the Academy chairperson?”

“This thing was originally made in her workshop.”

“……I see. That makes sense.” Neeju stared intently at the NB and nodded.

“W-what... If you have something to say, just say it clearly!”

“That person is famous for making high-performance junk, after all.”

“J-junk?!”

“I mean, an NB that fights with the brain of an important ship is just absurd. No matter how high-performance it is, it's useless if it does that.”

“That little animal is pretty much the same thing, isn’t it!”

“That’s exactly why. Fuku-chan is the brain of this ship.” Neeju picked up Fuku and stroked her gently to calm her down.

“On the other hand, you’re just an NB. It goes without saying which one is more important, doesn’t it?”

“That’s discrimination! Master, you’ll take my side, right?”

“Myaan!”

Just then, Fuku wagged her tail at Seina and gazed at him with her big, round eyes. Seina couldn’t help but smile at her cuteness.

“Y-you unfaithful Master~~!” NB tried to run outside, crying… but apparently not looking where he was going, he crashed into the wall with a loud thud.

“H-hey, NB!?”

Thud! Rumble...

NB, who had fallen from the wall to the floor, rolled right to Seina’s feet as he rushed over, worried.

“Fumyan!?”

“Fuku-chan!?”

Fuku, who had been held by Neeju, slipped out of her arms, jumped down to the floor, and tottered over to NB.

“...Ouch, that hurts.”

“Mya? Fumya… Myau, myaa!” Fuku, who had been staring intently at NB, suddenly began rubbing her cheek against him with a delighted expression.

“Huh? …Could it be that this is what it was like back in the locker room?”

“Yeah, that’s about right… but I have no idea what Fuku is thinking.”

Seina looked a bit confused.

“I’m sure the problem lies with NB. Being too high-performance can be a problem, you know.” Neeju said this in a deliberately cheerful tone, trying to cheer Seina up.

“I mean, the way NB reacts, it’s really like talking to a person. So maybe that’s why they don’t quite click.”

“……It’s true, when I talk to him, it feels just like talking to a normal person… He does end up arguing with Kiriko-san and the others sometimes, though……”

“Hehe, Kiriko-onee-chan is coming over to cook for us soon. She said, ‘Let’s all have a meal together today.’”

“Yes, I understand.”

Although Seina was somewhat persuaded by Neeju’s words, he still felt a deep sense of anxiety. It was because this was his first time taking responsibility for Fuku, a young child who couldn’t yet protect herself.

“Myaa! Myaa!”

Fuku seemed excited as she clung to Kiriko’s legs while she cooked in the kitchen.

“Come on, Fuku. You mustn’t get in Kiriko-san’s way.” Seina gently admonished her as he quickly picked up her and, moving toward the counter on the opposite side of the open kitchen so as not to get in Kiriko’s way.

“It’s funny how little kids always get interested when you’re doing something in the kitchen. Kai was like that, and I guess I was too.” Kiriko said cheerfully as she smiled at Fuku, who was staring intently at her.

“Yoshiko was like that too. As for me…” Seina’s expression clouded slightly at that.

“Well, you don't need to say anything more, I certainly understand.”

“There are a lot of dangerous things in the kitchen, after all.”

Amane, who was sitting at the counter, and Elma, who was helping Kiriko, said with wry smiles.

“Myaa, myaa.” Fuku seemed to want a closer look and leaned forward.

“Come on, Fuku. Let’s just watch quietly from over here.”

“Big brother, I think it’s hard to see from that angle.”

“Huh? Oh, I see.”

Just as Neeju said, from that position, Kiriko’s hands were barely visible. Seina tried raising Fuku’s position. Suddenly, Fuku calmed down and started wagging her tail. Just then, Neeju sensed something in that spot and said,

“Big brother, let me have Fuku-chan.” She said as she snatched Fuku from Seina and placed her on top of her head.

“Neeju-chan!?”

“This way is more comfortable for both you and Fuku-chan, right?” Neeju smiled brightly.

The position of her head was almost exactly the same height that Seina had held Fuku a moment ago.

“But on your head...!”

“It’s such a hassle to have her on your head, “ Seina was about to say that when Sasami’s figure overlapped with Neeju’s.

(…Come to think of it, Sasami-chan always used to let Ryo-chan sit on her head, didn’t she?) Seina thought as he noticed Kiriko looking at Neeju and smiling.

Kiriko was probably thinking the same thing as Seina. A moment later, their eyes met, and the two of them laughed as if to confirm it.

“What’s so funny? Why are you two laughing?” Infected by their smiles, Amane asked with a wry grin.

“Huh? Oh, sorry. Actually…”

Kiriko continued cooking as she began telling Amane and the others about Sasami and Ryo-Ohki.

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One dish after another of the food Kiriko had prepared was laid out on the large sunken kotatsu-style dining table across from the kitchen.

“Myaa!”

Excited by the sight, Fuku jumped down from Neeju's head onto the dining table.

"Fuku-chan, no!" Kiriko's voice was gentle yet firm.

Fuku stopped in her tracks as if she'd been struck by lightning.

"The table is for food. That's why you're not allowed to get on it."

Kiriko placed a small box between Seina and Neeju, then folded a towel and laid it on top. It was just the right height for Fuku to eat the food on the table. Kiriko picked up Fuku and sat her down there.

"This is Fuku-chan's spot."

"Myaa?" Fuku looked back and forth between Seina and Neeju, then glanced at Amane and the others sitting across from them, as well as the scene around the table.

"Myaa!" Realizing she'd been given a seat just like Seina and the others, Fuku began wagging her tail happily.

"Good for you, Fuku."

"Yes, here's Fuku-chan's meal."

In front of Fuku, who was thoroughly enjoying being petted by Seina, Kiriko arranged ten small rectangular dishes filled with various dishes in a row, like piano keys. They looked just as luxurious as the other dishes laid out on the table.

Kiriko had decided it would be best not to feed Fuku, who had only just been born, any strongly flavored or heavily seasoned foods. However, seeing everyone else enjoying a variety of dishes, she felt it would be lonely for her to be the only one eating something resembling baby food, so she prepared a special mead for her that rivaled the others in variety.

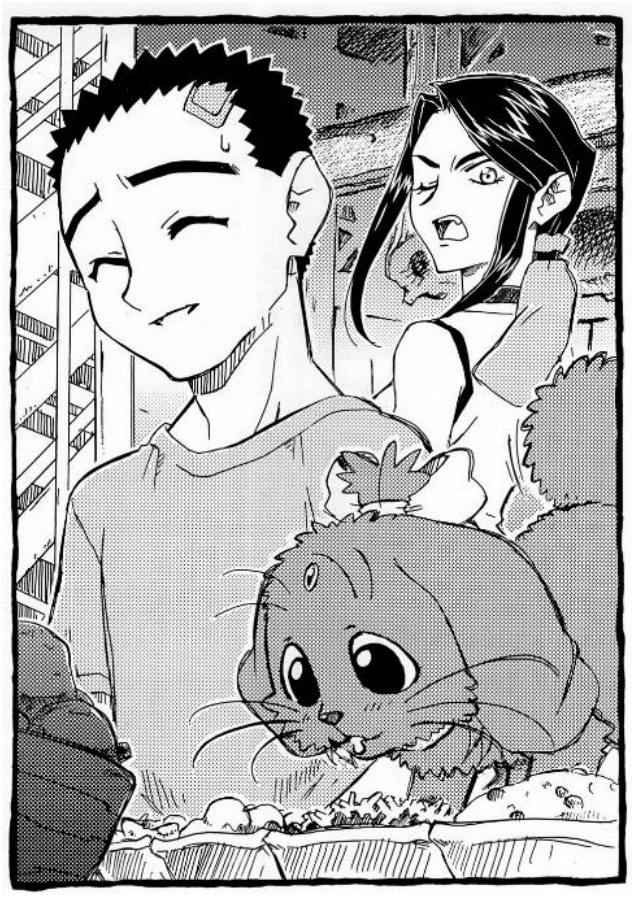
"Myaa! Myaa!"

Just as Kiriko had expected, Fuku was excited by the food laid out before her and looked around at Seina and the others as if to show it off.

"Fuku-chan, isn't this a wonderful feast? But you'll have to wait until everyone else's food is ready."

"Myaa?"

Hearing Neeju say that Fuku looked around and, realizing that no one had touched their food yet, sat up straight. Still, drawn by the delicious smells and the dazzling array of dishes, Fuku's head gradually leaned closer to the food, and she began to hunch forward.



“Fuku-chan.” Kiriko called out to stop her just as her nose was about to touch the food.

“Mya!”

Fuku quickly sat up straight. But that didn’t last long; before everything was ready and permission to eat was given, Kiriko had to remind her of it three more times.

“Fumyaaaan...”

With her belly swollen to bursting, Fuku lay sprawled on a large cushion, looking satisfied. After a meal followed by a moderate workout, Fuku’s body gradually relaxed, and her eyelids slowly closed. Within seconds, she began to snore softly.

“Well, I’m going to study a bit.”

After confirming that Fuku had fallen asleep, Seina quietly and gently stood up.

“Why don’t you have some tea first?” Kiriko called out, carrying a tray with a teapot and a teacup.

“I’m running a little behind schedule because of Seto-sama’s package.”

“I see. Thank you for your hard work.”

“Big brother, leave Fuku-chan to me.”

“Okay. I’ll leave her to you.”

Seina took NB with him to a corner of the living room and set up a secret wall.

“Well then, shall we move over here?”

Kiriko draped a towel over the sleeping Fuku and moved from the dining area to the living room, which was partitioned off by a screen.

“I heard you’re from the same hometown as Seina, Kiriko-san. Could today’s meal be from there?”

“Yes. Um… did it not suit your taste?”

“It felt a little light, but it was plenty… no, it was quite delicious. Kiriko-san, you’re a great cook. You could even make it in our royal court.”

“Thank you. I was worried it might be inappropriate for Neeju-sama, but I make this dish at least once during every mission.”

“I see… So it’s for Seina’s sake.”

Many of Seina’s missions were dangerous, or rather, they were based on the assumption that he would face unforeseen situations, just like during the “Seto Package Incident.” Although he was provided with appropriate equipment and personnel, the pressure placed on Seina himself was something no ordinary person could endure. Normally, missions of that nature would be carried out by those who had received specialized training and accumulated considerable experience; the fact that Seina, who was still a student, was entrusted with such a task was, in itself, extraordinary.

“Yes. I wanted to help relieve his mental fatigue, even just a little… No, maybe I’m hoping he’ll start missing home.”

“Hey, Kiriko… are you still thinking like that?”

“I think I understand how she feels.” Neeju said, cutting Amane off.

“When I first saw the detailed report on Seina-san, I got the impression that the situation was very precarious.”

“Precarious, you say?”

“The chances of a child like this living a long life are slim. Or rather, perhaps it’s more accurate to say his mind will break down before his body does. Is there really any point in going through all this trouble just to call me? That was my honest reaction when I first heard about it.”

“……And how do you feel about it now?”

“To be honest, I was surprised by how normal he is. I thought he might be mentally unstable in some way, but he truly has a healthy mind, and he’s not insensitive either… I wouldn’t go so far as to call it a miracle, but I can certainly see why Seto-sama has high hopes for him.”

At Neeju’s words, Amane and Elma’s expressions brightened.

“...But I can’t guarantee what will happen from here on out. The expectations of those around us tend to grow, and the standards demanded of us rise as well.”

“Well, we’ve already discussed that at length, including Seina. But the conclusion is that Seina has no intention of stepping down.”

“Aren’t you just cutting off his escape route by doing that?”

“That… I’m not really confident about.”

Elma nodded in agreement with Amane.

“Neeju-sama. Ever since he was old enough to understand, Seina-chan has had his natural

potential constantly blocked by his bad luck. He had already given up on his future by the time I met him at age three. A three-year-old child, mind you! But…"

"Did going up to space open a path through that blocked destiny?"

"If Seina-chan were to retrace his steps, someone would surely have to sacrifice themselves because of his bad luck."

"I think it's okay to be a little more selfish…"

"Actually, there was an incident that was pretty close to that."

"...I see. So that's why you're all keeping Seina-san in line." Neeju smiled wryly and glanced briefly at Fuku.

Kamidake was clearly one of the tools being used to keep him in line.

"Come to think of it, is it just my imagination, or are you trying to put a chain on him while you're keeping him in line?"

"Back when he was on Earth, Seina-chan's wish was to go into space, to go as far as he possibly could."

"Escape the galaxy, huh… I suppose that would definitely call for putting a leash on him."

From the perspective of the current Galactic Federation, wanting to go into space meant venturing beyond the galaxy. Of course, there were many unexplored places within the galaxy as well. It was said that even if you gathered all the planets surveyed by the Galactic Federation, the pirates, and the Renza Federation, they would only account for about thirty percent of the entire galaxy; even the most prosperous prehistoric civilizations were said to have explored less than fifty percent. In that context, dreaming of escaping the galaxy was no exaggeration to call one a complete eccentric, a hermit, or even a suicide candidate.

If Seina wished to fulfill his own desires while ensuring he caused no harm to others, choosing to set out alone on a journey beyond the galaxy was a perfectly natural course of action.

"With Kamidake's capabilities, it seems Seina-san's wish might just come true."

"Indeed, aside from an Imperial Ship and Ryo-Ohki, it's arguably the finest ship in the Galactic Federation."

"Still, wouldn't the real benefit go to the one holding the reins?"

"Hey, what do you all think about Seina-san's wish? Are you in favor of it? Or against it?"

Neeju deliberately looked at Amane and Elma. She wanted to hear Kiriko's answer last.

“Well… I think Seina’s still too young to talk about that. But…” Amane said, then suddenly took on a serious expression and began to ponder something.

“Huh? Wait a minute…” Amane, who had been deep in thought, suddenly blushed and looked flustered.

“Amane-san? What’s wrong?”

“No, it's nothing... Anyway, what about you, Elma?”

“I…!”

When Neeju brought it up and she actually took the time to think seriously about Seina’s future, Elma realized the reason behind Amane’s agitation.

She had met Seina and thought about his future, but those thoughts had always been mediated by Kiriko, so it had all felt somewhat detached. After all, ever since she’d become involved with Seina, her life had been a whirlwind of activity, and she’d been too busy dealing with the present to think about anything else. But when she took the time to reconsider Seina’s future path, she realized it had changed dramatically since she first met him.

At first, it was an interest in a rare statistical anomaly. Next came sympathy and a desire to protect him and a sense of gratitude for having been saved. And now, the most important thing of all was that Seina was at the center of the place where she could simply be Elma, not Ryoko Balta.

(Oh, I see! I, regarding Seina-kun...)

Elma realized that the future path she imagined for Seina and her own path aligned to a degree that surprised even her. The reason she hadn’t noticed this before was out of consideration for Kiriko, and because, from Elma’s perspective, Seina was still just a child.

“...I’d like to let Seina-kun do as he wishes. Of course, I can’t give my permission until he’s gained proper strength, but in the future, when that condition is met...” Elma looked at Amane as if seeking her approval, “I’m also interested in the regions beyond the galaxy,” she said decisively.

Elma spoke for Amane as well, as evidenced by her blushing cheeks and wry smile. That said, it was clear that her confusion still outweighed everything else. For both of them, it was merely that they had begun to see Seina as a man.

“I see. So what about you, Kiriko-san?”

“W-well, I…”

Kiriko’s reaction clearly showed she understood the meaning behind Amane and Elma’s words. Yet, she was still torn inside.

“I think it’s still too early for me to come to that conclusion. Both physically and mentally… no, more important than that is experience. I want to let him experience ordinary, everyday

happiness."

"You sound just like a mother. Though in Kiriko-san's case, I suppose there's no helping it, but if you keep this up, your own mother will really end up beating you to it." Neeju's smile clearly showed she was aware of the exchange with Kuisu.

"Wha, , Neeju-sama!?" Kiriko let out a startled cry

Amane and Elma, like sharks that had caught the scent of blood, quickly leaned in.

"Kiriko's mother, is that the person who greeted us when we arrived on Jurai? Seriously?"

"It's true that she's been watching over Seina-kun just like Kiriko-san, and it wouldn't be strange for a mother and daughter to share similar tastes."

"She had a certain presence about her. She could be a pretty tough opponent, don't you think?"

Naturally, for Amane and the Elma, who would live for centuries, the age difference between Seina and Tsukiko didn't feel unnatural or like an obstacle. So Neeju's information meant the emergence of a new rival. Still, for the two of them, curiosity outweighed any sense of urgency.

"Whoa, I'm going to rest now. I also need to do some pre-departure checks." Kiriko bowed to Neeju and hurried toward the front door.

"Ah, she ran away! Hey, Kiriko!"

"You two should get some rest too! Things are going to get hectic after we set sail! Oh, and please clean up after yourselves." Kiriko shouted, as if to brush off Amane and Elma words, then slammed the front door shut.

"Heh. It still feels a bit strange to see Seina-san as a man… What happened in the bathhouse on Jurai was a perfect example of that."

"True, pushing Seina-kun away like that did feel a little unnatural… But wasn't it just because it was so sudden, and she was embarrassed?"

"No, it's a bit complicated. If I thought of Seina as a child, I definitely wouldn't have shoved him like that… but even though he's still growing up, he does have a man's body now."

"Hehe... I have been getting a little flustered around him lately?"

"But don't you think the reaction at that time was a bit excessive?"

"If you say it was excessive, then perhaps it was..."

"So, in other words, Kiriko is the one who feels the biggest gap between the Seina-san of her childhood and the Seina-san of today."

"Are you saying she's afraid of Seina-kun becoming a man?"

“It would be more accurate to say she’s afraid of accepting that fact.”

“True, her relationship with Seina will change. Mother and child... or maybe sister and brother? After all, they’re going to become a woman and a man.”

“Kiriko-san is… such a serious person.”

“That said, I can’t really say anything about Kiriko either. I need some time to sort out my own feelings, just like she does.” Amane flashed a shy smile, downed the rest of her tea in one gulp, and set the cup back on the tray.

“Neeju-sama. Is this part of the investigation, by any chance?”

“It’s just a simple survey. In any case, Hakuren-san and her group were intentionally removed from this mission. Ah, I’ll take care of the cleanup. I’d like to make some tea for Seina-san when he finishes studying.”

“Understood. We’ll leave the rest to you, then.”

Elma and Amane bowed to Neeju and headed for the entrance.

“……Hmm. Does this mean there might still be room for me to get involved?” Neeju murmured with a shy smile, after hearing the front door close.

Just then, a faint sound came from behind the screen,

“Fu, fumya… Fumyaan. Mya, myaaaaaaan.”

A faint cry could be heard.

“Fuku-chan?”

“Mya! Myaaa! Myaaaan!”

Just as Neeju, having heard Fuku’s voice, was about to stand up, Fuku’s meow turned into a shrill scream.

“Fuku-chan, Fuku-chan”

Calling out to Fuku in a loud voice, Neeju ran toward the screen. With tears welling up in her eyes, Fuku leaped out of the towel the moment she spotted Neeju and rushed over to her.

“Myaa! Myaa!”

It wasn’t so much a cry of joy at seeing Neeju as it was a cry calling for Seina.

“If you’re looking for Seina, he's studying right now... Oh, Fuku-chan!?”

The moment Neeju pointed to the secret wall in the corner of the living room, Fuku leaped out of Neeju’s arms.

“Figya!”

Ignoring the fact that she hadn’t landed properly and had slammed her body hard against the floor, Fuku wobbled and staggered straight toward the corner of the living room, rolling along like a rubber ball. Then she crashed into the secret wall and bounced back into the room.

“Myaa! Myaa!”

Even so, Fuku kept searching for Seina, charging into the secret wall’s field over and over again.

“Fuku-chan, Fuku-chan!” Neeju grabbed Fuku and picked her up, trying to stop her futile efforts.

“It’s okay. Seina isn’t going anywhere. He’s just working in there right now. So you mustn’t disturb him.”

“Myaa?”

“He’s in there. If you wait quietly, he’ll come back to you as soon as he’s done with his work.”

Neeju held Fuku close, cradling her in both arms. Perhaps comforted by her warmth, Fuku calmed down a little, stopped struggling, and relaxed her body. When Neeju gently peered down at her, Fuku wagged her tail in response, but she still seemed more concerned about Seina, glancing toward the Secret Wall through the gaps in her hands.

Neeju moved a small footstool to a spot where the Secret Wall was clearly visible and sat Fuku on top of it.

“From here, you’ll know right away if when he comes out.”

“Myaa.”

She stroked Fuku’s head as she wagged her tail happily, then sat down in the spot on the sofa closest to her and accessed Kamidake’s data library.

“This is... incredible.”

It contained data on every conceivable book from all eras and regions. It easily surpassed the library prepared in Neeju’s palace, or any library accessible from there.

“...Well, let’s give it a try.”

Out of curiosity, Neeju searched for books from Melmas. An overwhelming amount of data appeared, forcing her to immediately enter a more specific search term. Then, taking a chance, Neeju typed in a rather obscure term.

“No way…” Neeju was left speechless at the search results.

There lay a collection of picture books that Neeju’s late mother had created with a writer friend and self-published in a run of about fifty copies. They had been distributed to friends

as wedding favors, but most were lost in wars, and Neeju herself no longer possessed any of them.

Since Neeju became famous as a Shrine Maiden of Melmas, there was a rumor once that a collector had discovered them, but the truth of that remained unknown, and since then, nothing more had ever been heard about those books.

“Who is Hakubi Washu?” Neeju muttered, stared intently at the cover without even glancing at the contents of the picture book.

Vague memories, or rather, images, from the past, which had remained only as a hazy , gradually came back to life with greater clarity thanks to the book. While many of those memories were sad, the nostalgia and joy outweighed them, making it a comforting experience.

“Myaa!”

“!!”

Neeju, who had been lost in pleasant memories, was snapped back to reality by Fuku’s joyful cry. Neeju reflexively looked over at Fuku and immediately understood the reason for her joy.

“Myaa! Myaa! Myaa!”

Fuku clung to Seina, rubbing her cheek against his, licking his face, and greeting him in a state of sheer ecstasy.

“H-hey, Fuku… what’s going on?”

Fuku’s behavior was so intense that Seina actually looked worried.

“Well, big brother…” Neeju smiled wryly and began preparing to make tea.

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“So that’s what happened… I’m sorry, Fuku.”

After hearing the story from Neeju, Seina gently stroked Fuku, who was clinging to his knees. Fuku was sucking on the hem of Seina’s T-shirt, as if drinking milk.

“Hey, NB, this is a substitute behavior for drinking milk, right? Is she going to be okay?”

“As far as I checked the manual, there’s no need to worry. She doesn’t actually need breast milk or anything, but I guess she’s just exhibiting the reactions of the organism she’s based on.”

“Well, that’s good to hear.”

“Since she wasn’t fully formed at birth but was designed to grow, it might be a function built into her system. To put it simply, since she’s just been born, it’s just a behavior seeking

emotional stability. She should settle down as she grows. Besides, Washu-han checks on her regularly, so if you're worried, just talk to her then."

"……You're right. Maybe I'll ask Kiriko-san about it later."

When Seina looked at Fuku again, Fuku had stopped sucking on his hem and was looking at Seina, wagging her tail.

"Hm? Fuku, have you calmed down?"

"Myaa."

"Well then, let's take a bath and get some rest."

"I'll join you then."

The moment NB said that Fuku climbed onto Seina's shoulder and made her hair stand on end.

"Gyaaaah!"

"What's this? You think you can take me on? You're a hundred years too early to challenge me!"

Thud! The next moment, NB was hit by a kick from Fuku and was slammed into the wall.

"Fuku, you... you're just a toddler, but your kick is pretty impressive."

"Mya!" Fuku meowed contentedly and rubbed up against Seina.

"What about Neeju-chan?"

"It hasn't been that long since I got in after swimming, and I don't want to bother Fuku-chan."

"Well then, I'll leave the rest to you." With that, Seina headed to the bathroom with Fuku still perched on his shoulder.

"What, you don't need to wash Master's back?"

"I have my own reasons for that." Neeju said only that, then began putting away the teapot and teacups.

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"Good morning."

"Hm? ...Ah, Kirche-san!"

Seina woke up to the sound of Kirche's voice for the first time in a while. The very next moment, he jumped out of bed. It was because he had met Kirche and had something he absolutely needed to talk to her about regarding the incident with Seto's package.

“I’m sorry for all the trouble I’ve caused.”

But before Seina could speak, Kirche bowed deeply.

“Not at all! Thanks to you, Kirche-san, I was saved. But now that I’m awake… I can’t bring myself to honestly thank you for it. I’m sorry.”

“No! …There’s no doubt that, in the end, I ended up dragging Alan-san and the others into this.”

“That’s my fault as captain.”

“Let’s drop this topic. I’m sure everyone here has some regrets of their own. As Tennyo-sama said, I think that trying to take responsibility isn’t always in anyone’s best interest.”

“Yes, that might be true. …But thank you! Please let me at least say that.”

“I'm so happy...” Tears welled up in Kirche’s eyes, but she quickly wiped them away.

“Ah, um! I asked you here today because there was something I wanted to tell you.”

“Something you wanted to tell me?”

“It’s about why Fuku-chan and NB are fighting.”

“Huh!? Actually, I've been really curious about that...”

“It’s a very simple reason. It seems Fuku-chan knows who’s controlling NB.”

“So, could it be…”

“Yes. They always end up fighting when Airi-sama is manipulating things. I don't know how she knows, but I think she's trying to protect you.”

“But... is it really possible to tell something like that?”

“I couldn’t believe it at first either, but every time Airi-sama and I exchange control, she reacts, so I’m certain of it.”

“I see. So that’s how it is… I’m relieved. Thank you for telling me.”

“I was so happy, and I wanted to share the news with you as soon as possible.”

“Huh?”

“Well… Fuku-chan recognizes me, after all.”

There were only a handful of people besides Airi who truly recognized Kirche. Kiriko and the others only knew the mechanics of NB; they didn’t know that the Kirche’s personality existed within it. Of course, that was the outcome she herself desired, but honestly, it would be a lie to say she didn't feel lonely.

“Have there been any developments with your father?”

“According to Airi-sama, she says she’s ‘filled in the outer moat’…”

By “outer moat,” she meant the contractual and legal issues that arose following Kirche’s disappearance. The penalty for breach of contract would naturally fall on her father, Kirche’s creator, but those problems had already been resolved by Airi, acting as a benevolent third party.

“However, I think it will take time for my father’s… no, for his emotional wounds to heal.”

“Is that so…? I suppose that might be true.” Seina looked at Kirche and let out a small sigh.

Kirche is always beautiful and lovely, possessing an aura that makes her truly worthy of being called an idol. Giving up on her would be like letting go of a priceless treasure.

If this were just a father, he would have the support of his wife and the bond of blood. But in her father’s case, the problem lay in the fact that he was, after all, her creator. It was like growing a tree that bore incredibly delicious fruit, only to be forbidden from eating it, and then having someone else eat it instead. And if the only reward for creating it was the honor of having done so, it was only natural that he couldn’t easily come to terms with it. That said, this was strictly the father’s perspective. From Kirche’s point of view, he wasn’t a parent restraining a child, but an act tantamount to enslaving her.

(……Poor thing.)

Seina understood all too well the pain of wanting something he couldn’t have. Yet he was also fully aware of the fact that some things were simply beyond his control.

“Once everything’s settled, will you go back to the entertainment industry?”

“I probably won't be going back...”

The entertainment industry was desperately trying to find a successor to Kirche, holding massive auditions and repeatedly going to court to obtain permission to use her likeness. However, this only served to provide fodder for the media, and Kirche was gradually being relegated to the past, becoming nothing more than a legend.

“No, I have no intention of returning. It might sound like sour grapes, but I actually like the way things are now. I find real fulfillment in the work of supporting Seina-san, Kiriko-san, and the others.” She wore a radiant smile, the kind rarely seen even on TV.

“A sense of fulfillment?”

“Just think about it. I used to work as a reporter, but all I could see was just a little deeper than the average person. Whenever I tried to dig any deeper, I’d inevitably hit a wall called ‘censorship.’ But now, I get to see depths that I couldn’t reveal anywhere else. It’s almost impossible to even catch a glimpse of Airi-sama or Seto-sama… And on top of that, Fuku-chan and this ship were created by a legendary Philosopher, the most mysterious figure in Academy history!”

Watching Kirche speak so passionately, Seina looked relieved.

Although he had ultimately managed to rescue Kirche from her father's constraints and obsession, it was Seina's own actions that had forced Kirche into a life of seclusion. Of course, not all of it was Seina's fault, but he certainly felt guilty about it.

"Hearing you say that puts my mind at ease. I may still cause you some trouble from time to time, but I hope you'll continue to look out for me."

"I'm the one who should be thanking you, Seina-san."

Just as Kirche reached out to shake Seina's hand, "W-Wait, Fuku-chan!?"

As Kirche said that the monitor displaying the external feed came to life. And there, Fuku was shown shaking the NB.

"Mya, mya!" Fuku was meowing desperately, as if peering into the NB.

"Fuku-chan, are you calling for Seina-san by any chance?"

"Me? But…"

"...There's no mistake. That meow is the pattern she uses when calling for Seina-san."

"So Fuku is aware that I'm here?"

"Without a doubt…"

"Mya, myaa."

The force shaking NB gradually grew stronger, and Fuku meowed sadly. It was as if she were pleading to be included.

"Can you grant Fuku access here?"

"Airi-sama holds the access permissions, so it's not possible right away."

"This is a problem... I can't exactly wake up to deal with her..."

"How much sleep time do you have left?"

"About three hours left."

"Then I'll take care of Fuku-chan, so please go back to sleep, Seina-san."

"Three hours? Are you sure you'll be okay?"

"You're on duty anyway, so you'll need two hours for recovery. Besides, once you're out of the accelerated space, it won't feel like much time at all."

The mental link with Kirche caused no physical fatigue, but it did come with a slight mental

strain. While this wasn't a problem in daily life, during a mission, even that slight fatigue could lead to impaired judgment. That's why a period of complete rest was necessary.

"I see. Then, please do so." Seina slipped into bed and closed his eyes.

"Myaa? Mya, myaa!"

Realizing the link had been severed, Fuku approached Seina's physical body. Fuku thought Seina had woken up.

"……Fuku"

NB whispered softly, as if to stop her. Both Seina and Neeju, who was sleeping next to him, were under sleep regulation and wouldn't wake up easily, but she still hesitated to speak in a normal voice.

"Sorry about that. Master needs to sleep a little longer. So…" NB abruptly cut himself off and began transforming into Kirche.

"Myau?" Perhaps intrigued by the sight, Fuku stopped in her tracks.

"This is the first time we've met in this form, isn't it?" Kirche gently picked up Fuku and held her close to her face.

"I can only talk while Seina-san is asleep. I didn't mean to talk to him alone without telling you, but I had something I absolutely had to tell Seina-san today, so I borrowed Seina-san for just a little while. I'm sorry." Kirche didn't know if Fuku could understand her explanation, but she explained it sincerely and carefully anyway.

"Seina-san has a mission, so he has to rest a little longer."

"Myaa…" Fuku stared intently at Seina. Then, looking back at Kirche, she began wagging her tail, perhaps as a sign of understanding.

"Thank you. You're such a good girl. …Hey, Fuku-chan, if you're not sleepy anymore, do you want to go for a walk with me? Or would you rather go to sleep with Seina-san?"

Fuku glanced briefly at Seina and Neeju, but immediately wagged her tail at Kirche. It was Fuku's thoughtful gesture to avoid disturbing Seina and Neeju's sleep.

"You're such a good girl. Really, such a good girl."

Realizing Fuku's feelings, Kirche hugged her close and gently stroked her body. Then, she quietly moved from the bedroom to the living room and headed toward the entrance. The entrance itself served as a deceleration field, and after a momentary sense of disorientation, the door opened.

Once outside, they were in a space where time flowed normally, and the large screen on the outer wall displayed the scenery of their current location.

“It feels so nice.” Kirche stretched her arms wide in the cool breeze.

The view outside captured the very moment of sunrise. With Fuku perched on her head, Kirche began walking toward the circular park in the center.

“If we’re outside, Seina-san will wake up in about twenty minutes.”

“Myaa!”

Fuku was keeping an eye on the direction of Seina’s house, but was also excited about the walk with Kirche. Kirche felt the same way.

Perhaps because both Kirche and Fuku were artificial intelligences created by human hands, there had been a strange sense of empathy between them ever since they met. Furthermore, Kirche felt the same way about Miki as well.

“Mya, mya!” Fuku, lying on her stomach on Kirche’s head, was giggling with delight at the sensation of her body bouncing slightly with each up-and-down movement as Kirche walked.

“Hehe, having fun?”

“Myaa!”

Seeing Fuku so happy, Kirche felt a happiness that was almost ticklish. As a digital entity, she experienced physical sensations through sensors, but the sensations she felt through NB were far more vivid and intricate than anything her own sensors could provide. The warmth and weight of Fuku on her head, along with her playful antics, felt incredibly comforting, and she savored that bliss for the hundred or so meters it took to reach the pond in the center of the park.

“Whoa!?”

But that bliss came to an abrupt end. Kirche instantly transformed back into her original NB form.

“Myau?”

Fuku, looking down at the NB in puzzlement, noticed someone rapidly approaching. At first, the figure was no bigger than a pea, but in the blink of an eye, it had sprinted right up to Fuku and the others.

“Fuku-chan, NB! What are you doing here?”

The one who called out to them with concern was Kiriko, dressed in her school uniform.

“NB, did something happen?”

“Fuku woke up early. Since she couldn’t go back to sleep, I was taking her for a walk so as not to disturb Master.”

“Oh, well, that’s good then. …Still, what an unusual pair you two make.”

Kiriko gently stroked Fuku’s head. Fuku, looking delighted, playfully nuzzled Kiriko’s hand.

“Kiriko-han. I’m counting on you to take care of this little girl.”

With that, NB suddenly shoved Fuku toward Kiriko, a little roughly.

“Hey, NB!”

“I'm busy taking care of the Master, you know...”

“Miyaaah!”

Fuku and Kiriko performed a spectacular triangle jump using the park trees, kicking NB into the gate of the bridge. But that was the end of the spectacular part; Fuku lost her balance and fell to the ground.

“Fuku-chan!” Kiriko moved quickly and caught Fuku just before she hit the ground.

Then, lifting her up in both arms, she said, “Hey! Fuku-chan, you shouldn’t be so reckless. And you shouldn’t be rough with NB.” She scolded her, glaring at her with a slightly stern expression.

But Fuku was wagging her tail with a beaming smile.

“Oh, come on… do you even understand?”

Faced with that adorable smile, Kiriko couldn’t keep her stern expression and almost burst out laughing. She pulled Fuku close to her chest so she wouldn’t see her face.

“You’re such a hopeless case. I’m angry, you know.”

But despite her words, her tone was very gentle. And it was the same tone she used with Seina.

“Myaa.”

Fuku slipped out of Kiriko’s arms, climbed up to her shoulder, and rubbed her cheek against Kiriko’s. It was her way of thanking Kiriko for saving her when she’d nearly fallen after a botched landing.

“Well, I suppose NB was a bit rough, too…”

It was impossible for her to maintain a stern face with Fuku any longer. At this point, Kiriko had already surrendered to Fuku’s cuteness. That said, Kiriko wasn’t the type to just go soft right there. Fuku, still young and inexperienced, had become the partner of Seina, who possessed an extreme bias.

(I have to stay strong!) Kiriko reaffirmed her mission.

“It’s about time Seina-chan wakes up. I’ll take you there, so get ready and come to the bridge.”

Just as she had done when she arrived, Kiriko placed Fuku on her head and set off toward Seina’s house with a light step.

(I’ve been wanting to try this for a while, hehe.)

“Damn you, little brat!” Airi shouted at the top of her lungs overcome with rage

She tried to kick the desk in the principal’s office. But the desk moved swiftly out of the way, dodging Airi’s kick.

“Yikes!” Letting out a surprisingly cute scream, Airi fell backward.

She hit the back of her head hard and writhed in pain, unable to make a sound. At that time, Airi had returned to the Academy after her trip to Jurai for official business.

“Have you been found out again? For heaven’s sake, you should just stick to watching.”

“Why… why, why do you know?! I’ve already checked for external detection and anyone sending signals, everything!!”

Watching Airi grit her teeth in frustration, Mikami looked away, struggling desperately to hold back a laugh.

“That little one can sense when Seina-kun's consciousness has shifted to NB. There's no need for any tricks to sense Airi-sama's suspicious aura full of ulterior motives.”

Airi wasn’t the type to hide her true feelings. When she was manipulating NB, her expression gave her ulterior motives away completely, making it obvious what she was thinking. It was no wonder that this created a sense of unease in NB’s actions and words.

“How delightful! This is my greatest pleasure... No, one of the reasons I live. And that little brat is trying to...”

“How sweet of her to try to protect Seina-kun, ho ho ho.”

“Hmph! Taking the form of a cute little pet animal is just too sneaky! They usually take your side, don't they?”

“In this case, no matter how you look at it, Airi-sama is the one in the wrong.”

“B-but…”

“Are you still... holding a grudge?”

That referred to the fact that Fuku’s Astral core originally came from Widow.

“That’s water under the bridge. She’s a different person now. It’s just…”

“Just…”

“I'm so jealous! It's not fair, being in such a good position! It's so unfair, so unfair, so unfair!” Banging her fists on the desk, Airi threw a tantrum like a child.

“Why don’t you go live with your husband for a while?”

“But Yosho-kun… he just won’t say yes.”

“Huh?”

As Mikami looked puzzled, the chief secretary, who had been standing back at a distance to avoid getting involved, spoke to her via a secret communication channel.

‘It seems she tried to make him use a bio-marionette that looked just like her husband when they first met.’

‘…I see. That’s… interesting.’

Airi first met Yosho when he was just twelve years old.

“Besides, Seina-kun’s reactions are still so fresh and innocent…”

“Then I think the first thing you should do is learn to get along with the little one... Fuku-chan.”

From an educator’s standpoint, she should have stopped Airi’s behavior, but Airi’s complete lack of learning ability in that area was well-documented. Countless predecessors who had tried to correct her had all failed, eventually dubbing Airi a “natural disaster.” There was no way to stop a catastrophe of that magnitude; all they could do was steer her course toward a direction that would cause the least damage.

“That’s right. ‘If you want to shoot the general, shoot the horse first,’ after all. They both like the same carrot. Heh heh heh.”

Watching Airi laugh in an eerie way, Mikami sensed that Airi’s ambition was a long way off.

Chapter Six: Fuku · First Mission

Kamidake began to rise quietly from the lake about two hours after Seina and the others had awakened.

“We’ve received departure clearance and course instructions from Central Control.”

On the bridge, Seina and the crew were seated in the same formation as when they first arrived on this planet.

“The course is all clear. But it looks like the guys chasing us have started moving too.”

“How many?”

“Three small ships. Judging by their energy-mass readings, they’re pretty high-performance vessels… But they seem awfully amateurish. Their tracking is blatant, too. Do they really think they can do anything to us with that?”

“Don’t worry about them. Be more careful of ambushes. They’ll probably attack at the hyperspace jump point.”

“What’s up? Is it someone Neeju-han knows?”

“Then let’s use a Water Mirror to perform hyperspace navigation while in satellite orbit. An ambush at a standard jump point is dangerous and pointless.”

Neeju nodded slightly at Kiriko’s words. As Kiriko said, that wouldn’t serve as a sample for analyzing Seina’s characteristics.

“Is that really okay? A Water Mirror consumes a significant amount of energy.”

A Water Mirror was a method that flattened gravitational and spatial distortions to stabilize the conditions for entering hyperspace. Using it made hyperspace travel possible even on a planet, though it would inflict severe damage on the planet. Of course, in satellite orbit, there was absolutely no risk of damage to the planet. But Elma’s concern was less about that and more about Fuku.

“It’s fine. The controls themselves are simple.”

Normally, a Water Mirror was generated using three dedicated ships, but in the case of Kamidake or an Imperial Ship, three highly compressed energy cores were used. Charging and controlling them was simple if you proceeded step by step.

“In exchange, we’ll use standard hyperspace.”

“Understood.”

Elma and Amane immediately understood Kiriko’s intention. If Neeju’s goal was to assess Seina’s abilities, using higher-level hyperspace might run counter to that objective.

“NB, calculate the launch points and timing for the Water Mirror! Captain, please set the course.”

“Roger that!”

Before NB had even finished speaking, all the information appeared on Kiriko’s screen.

“Charging complete.”

“Launch point confirmed. Firing the cores.”

The three cores launched from the Kamidake generated circular fields in their respective

satellite orbits, and a Water Mirror appeared at the point where the three circles overlapped. However, since it was invisible to the naked eye, it was impossible to tell just how much energy was concentrated there.

“Program loaded! Initiating hyperspace jump!”

Seconds after breaking through the atmosphere, Kamidake plunged into hyperspace.

“Seto-sama, Kamidake departed from the midpoint and performed a hyperspace jump in satellite orbit.”

At the report from the Mikagami bridge operator, Seto, who had been reclining on her throne, sat up listlessly.

“You’re keeping a close eye on the targets’ movements, aren’t you? Just because they’re complete amateurs, so easy to monitor that even an apprentice could handle it, doesn’t mean we can let our guard down as long as Seina-dono is involved.”

“Understood. I’ll make sure everyone is fully aware again… That said, it’s actually kind of painful to watch them act like mischievous toddlers.”

“Everyone was actually suspicious that there must be some outrageous hidden agenda behind this.”

“Since Kuisu alone was enough to get Neeju out… well, I suppose the phrase ‘a piece of cake’ really does fit.”

That said, the escape was a carefully planned operation within Melmas that took time and involved recruiting many collaborators. It wasn’t as easy as Seto made it sound. But it was also true that trying to rescue someone in a similar position in another country would be much more difficult.

“Well, I’ll leave the rest to you. I’m going to rest a little longer.” With that, Seto lay back down on the throne.

“Why don’t you go rest in your room?”

“No way! There are ghosts there!”

“Ghosts?”

The operator looked puzzled and glanced at the operator next to her. She had just taken over the shift and wasn’t up to speed on the situation.

“I'm pretty sure it was in a report related to Kamidake, didn't they manage to recover?”

“After that, Gyokuren-chan and the others found out about Kamidake’s situation through the NB, and their anger flared up again.”

“Oh my... I see.”

“Well, they do understand the situation, so it’s not as big a fuss as it was on Jurai, but instead, there’s this quiet pressure that’s slowly building… Suiren-chan's silent attacks seem to be particularly effective.”

“Ah, I see. So that's why they're ghosts. Still, for Gyokuren-chan and Suiren-chan to corner Seto-sama like that all by themselves...”

“Usually, Hakuren-chan and Karen-chan are the ones who keep the others in check, right?”

“Oh, I see. Still, they’re growing up fast. When Seto-sama brought them here, all but one of them seemed so fresh-faced...”

“Oh, I actually think Gyokuren-chan has become even cuter. If she was separated from the very thing that made her that way, it’s no wonder she’s angry.”

“But who are they, anyway? No matter how talented they are or how much they’ve been trained here, their growth progress, or rather, their very foundation, is a bit different from ours… Though, of course, their natural refinement was impossible to hide.”

“It makes more sense to assume they were raised in that kind of environment and received that kind of education… but… “

“Any further speculation would be against the rules. Well, just getting to see something this rare, and up close at that, is worth it!!!!”

The operators glanced briefly at Seto and turned pale. Feeling a terror that made the hairs on their bodies stand on end, they quickly turned to face forward and threw themselves into their work as if to escape it.

What the operators had seen was Suiren, who had appeared out of nowhere, staring intently at Seto as she napped on the throne.

Even though Seina was unlucky, he didn't encounter pirates every time he jumped. However, this unusual pattern of bad luck gradually accumulated, and it all came together on the third jump-out.

“Five pirate ships, three unidentified!”

The pirate ships in the nearby sector where they had jumped out had detected Kamidake and made short-range jumps to positions where they could flank the ship.

“Mya!”

Beep! In an instant, the crosshairs locked onto each pirate ship. This was thanks to Fuku’s vigilance; her reaction speed surpassed even Amane’s.

“No!” Kiriko shouted, forcing a reset.

“Myau!?”

“You mustn’t attack the enemy!” Kiriko said firmly to Fuku, who was confused by the sudden cancellation.

The very next moment, the pirate ships opened fire on the Kamidake.

“Myaa!!” Fuku, now in a state of mild panic, froze in the center of the table, causing the ship’s controls to go haywire.

“Amane!”

Kiriko instinctively switched the control mode she had set, and at the same time, Amane took control of the ship to dodge the attack. The enemy’s attack passed right by Kamidake, but this was merely the minimum maneuver required to prepare for the next attack, a familiar evasion pattern to Seina and the rest of the crew. However, since a counterattack was not permitted, the attack passing so close was nothing but terror for Fuku. Above all, since Kamidake was Fuku’s body, the sensation of being attacked felt far more real than it ever would for Seina and the rest of the crew.

“Myaa! Myaa!” Driven by fear, Fuku ran to Seina, clung to his knees, and began to cry.

“Fuku, it's going to be okay. Fuku!”

Even as a figurehead captain, he had no time to tend to Fuku during combat. Since he was training to become a full-fledged captain in the future, he might be called upon to give orders, and he had to be prepared to designate a route for an emergency hyperspace jump.

“Fuku-chan!” Sensing the situation, Neeju moved her chair over to Seina’s side and picked up Fuku.

“It’s okay, it’s okay.” Neeju held Fuku close, hugging her tightly.

But since she was the vessel itself, Fuku’s fear of being exposed to the pirates’ attacks was not something that could be easily dispelled. Moreover, any attacks intended to eliminate that fear would be forcibly canceled.

“Emergency jump!”

A few seconds after Neeju shouted, Kamidake performed a hyperspace jump.

“Fuku, are you okay?”

As soon as they entered hyperspace and confirmed their surroundings were safe, Seina looked over at Fuku. Fuku slipped out of Neeju’s loosened arms and clung to Seina’s knees, trembling. Seina watched this scene with a puzzled expression, then looked at Kiriko and the others in turn.

This mission was strictly for Neeju's transport. Arresting pirates might be one thing, but since they were forbidden from attacking pirates in the first place, eliminating that threat was impossible. And they couldn't just abandon the mission midway.

Since there was no concrete way to ease Fuku's fear, Kiriko and the others could only shake their heads silently. In the end, all Seina could do was gently stroke Fuku to calm her down.

"Fuku, I'm sorry. But everyone's doing their best, and we won't let anyone hurt you, so please hang in there a little longer."

"……Mii." Fuku looked up at Seina with teary eyes.

"Captain, we'll be returning to normal space shortly."

"Roger."

"Fuku-chan, since big brother has to work, I'll hold you."

"Mii!"

But Fuku didn't want to let go of Seina.

"Come on, I'll stay right here next to your big brother."

Neeju pulled Fuku close to her a little forcefully and slid her chair right up next to Seina's. As if to follow her lead, Seina reached out and stroked Fuku's head with his index finger.

"Mii…"

Perhaps reassured that Seina's hand could reach her, Fuku curled up tightly in Neeju's arms, as if seeking protection.

"Returning to normal space! Air surveillance!"

With Kiriko's voice, Kamidake materialized back into normal space.

"Myaa!" Suddenly, Fuku let out a cry.

And in the very next instant, "Detecting shockwaves in close proximity! About twenty of them, they're jumping out!" Elma announced the pirates' attack.

Amane instantly understood the meaning behind Fuku's cry and reacted swiftly. Even before Elma's warning, she maneuvered Kamidake, effortlessly dodging the pirates' attack.

"Increase the control system by 10%!" Amane shouted, focusing even more intensely than before and continued to dodge the pirates' attacks.

Unlike before, this was an evasive maneuver where she kept a slightly wider distance to dodge the attacks, in order to ease Fuku's fear as much as possible.

"Mii…" Fuku seemed to have grasped Amane's intention, but she still stiffened and trembled.

“Neeju-han! We’ve got a transmission from Mikagami, ‘We’re ready’.”

“Roger! Big bro, jump again!” Neeju’s expression brightened instantly, upon receiving the report from NB.

“Roger! Emergency jump!” Seina quickly set the course and shouted to Kiriko.

A few seconds later, the Kamidake jumped into hyperspace.

“The message from Mikagami… could it be…”

Just as Kiriko, having confirmed they had entered hyperspace, was about to say that to Neeju,

“Myaa! Myaaa!” Fuku let out a warning cry.

Just then, the ship’s hull shook violently.

“Three enemy ships astern! It’s the bunch that chased us from the relay planet!”

“No way! A near miss in hyperspace…”

“But with you, Master, I guess it’s possible… this sort of thing.” NB said with a somewhat smug tone

Neeju simply looked astonished.

“Still, aren’t those guys idiots for initiating combat in hyperspace!?” Just as Amane shouted that, all but one ship jumped out.

“No! They’re planning to sacrifice one ship to take us out!”

The enemy ship launched a desperate attack as it closed in on the Kamidake.

“Energy levels rising! The enemy ship intends to self-destruct!”

“Jump out!”

“We’re linked to the enemy ship while in close range! We can’t escape even if we jump out !”

Even if they jumped out, if the enemy ship jumped out at nearly the same time, there would be almost no difference in their positions once they were back in normal space. In fact, if they were unlucky, there was even a chance they’d collide. In that case, staying as in hyperspace was still better. Of course, with Kamidake’s shield capabilities, it was possible to completely block even a large ship’s self-destruction at close range, but that was only if Kamidake was in perfect condition. With the still-inexperienced Fuku and Seina, there was no absolute guarantee.

“That near-miss was way too close, and there’s just not enough time to create distance…”

A prayerful silence hung over the bridge, and the moment the enemy ship was engulfed in white light, Seina quickly placed his hand on Fuku’s head as she trembled against Neeju’s

chest, “Fuku!” He called out.

“Myaan!!”

Fuku’s scream echoed long and loud through the bridge, and just as it slowly faded away, Kiriko and the others, who had braced themselves for the impact, looked up in puzzlement.

“What about the explosion? Are we okay?! ...Ahhh!”

Kiriko and the others let out cries of surprise as they looked at the scene displayed on the monitor. There, they could see the phosphorescent glow of the Upper Hyperspace.

“I see! If it’s the Upper Hyperspace, enemy ships can’t enter… But how is that possible?”

“Since communication is possible, there’s no reason the ship can’t do it. It should be easier than entering hyperspace from normal space… well, assuming the hull holds up, that is.”

“It held up, so that’s why we’re safe, right? More importantly, I can’t believe Fuku, who was whimpering like a baby, was able to do something like that on the spot.”

“Big brother.”

“Huh?”

“You and Fuku-chan... I guess you could call it perfect synchronicity. Hehe, I can't really explain it myself.”

After hearing Neeju’s explanation, Kiriko and the girls all turned to look at Seina.

“Huh? No, I was just acting on instinct too… I just thought, ‘Maybe…’ and touched Fuku…” He seemed taken aback.

“So you’re saying Fuku-chan picked up on the captain’s feelings?”

Ignoring Kiriko and the girls, who were still skeptical, Fuku looked at Seina and wagged her tail happily. It was as if she were confirming what Kiriko had said.

“Anyway, we’ll investigate whether this is true or not later. For now, let’s continue with the mission.”

“Kiriko-han, we’ve already passed the waypoint Master set. What should we do?”

“Then please initiate the jump-out at the captain’s discretion.”

“Roger! Everyone to your stations!”

As Seina spoke, the crew prepared for the jump-out and the phase that followed. After confirming their readiness, Seina took a deep breath, as if gathering his focus.

“Jump out!”

At Seina's command, Kamidake emerged into normal space.

"Anti-air surveillance! …Two enemies within a three-light-second radius. It's the ship we had a near miss with earlier!"

"...Elma, what's the enemy's status?"

Kiriko and the others looked at Elma with a hint of puzzlement. Since they had detected the enemy, the enemy must have noticed them as well. Especially since they were so close.

"But… it seems they haven't noticed us yet… Wait! Weight shock detection from a jump-out! Six pirate ships heading this way. It looks like that ship has just noticed us too." Elma smiled wryly, looking slightly exasperated.

And for some reason, Neeju's cheeks were flushed with embarrassment.

"Mya! Myaa!"

As the pirate ships approached, Fuku, who had been in high spirits just moments ago, winced and went on high alert. The very instant she did, nearly twenty pirate ships jumped out, surrounding them.

Kamidake began moving toward a spot where the encirclement was thinner, but just a few seconds later, nearly twenty more pirate ships jumped out to block that route.

"Ugh! They're starting to move in an organized manner. What should we do?" Amane muttered to herself, while dodging the enemy fleet's attacks.

"Emergency jump!"

"That won't be necessary!" Neeju, who had been staring intently at Seina, spoke in a composed, mature voice.

"Kiriko-san, I'm declaring the mission complete as of now!"

"R-Roger!"

Kiriko entered "mission complete" into the order form from Seto. At that moment, a program hidden within the order form activated, sending a short signal somewhere.

"Fuku-chan, I'm disabling the protection!"

The moment Kiriko shouted that, targeting markers appeared on all the pirate ships, and a beam was fired from the Kamidake. But...

"Your aim is off! Fuku!?"

Most of the attacks were missing, and the rest were dodged. Amane shifted her gaze slightly away from the monitor and caught a glimpse of Fuku out of the corner of her eye.

"Myaa! Myaa!" Fuku clung to Neeju, still trembling.

Although the shield had been deactivated and they were now able to attack, the fear of the pirates that had been ingrained in her was lowering her accuracy.

“I’ll compensate for it! Kiriko, change the control pattern!”

“Wait! High-mass wave detected! This energy-to-mass ratio and waveform pattern…”

“The Seventh Sentinel Fleet! Kanemitsu-sama!!”

That pattern was one Kiriko knew well.

The Seventh Sentinel Fleet, having jumped out, instantly identified its targets and began attacking all the pirate ships simultaneously with pinpoint accuracy. And with just the first wave, they rendered the entire enemy fleet incapacitated.

“Whoa! That’s impressive!” Impressed by their overwhelming skill, Amane couldn’t help but whistle in admiration.

Just then, a communication came in from Kanemitsu.

“Sorry I’m late. Are you all okay over there?”

“Thank you for saving us. Everyone here is safe.” Seina said as they all stood up and saluted.

“I see. That’s the most important thing… Hmm? It looks like there’s one child who’s been through a scary ordeal.” Noticing Fuku with tears in her eyes, Kanemitsu said with a gentle expression.

Though usually a rough-and-tumble warrior, perhaps because he had recently become a father, there was a reassuring softness in his expression.

“...Mii.” Realizing who had saved her, Fuku looked at Kanemitsu and began wagging her tail.

“Hmph… We’ll handle the aftermath, so head to your destination. The culprit who scared that little one is there, so you should go ahead and give her a piece of your mind. As luck would have it, she’s a bit weakened right now, so go all out on her.” Kanemitsu said cheerfully, then cut the communication.

“The one responsible for giving her a scare… he means Seto-sama, right? What does he mean she’s a little weakened?”

“Anyway, let’s get going.”

And with that, Kamidake performed a hyperspace jump toward their final destination.

Kamidake jumped out near a food resource planet in Jurai’s territorial space. In its orbital path was a massive plant and spaceport used for exports.

“Seto-sama is here?”

“Since it's a food-producing planet, hardly any outsiders come here, but our exports go all over the place, so it's perfect for disguising our movements. It also helps that many of the containers are extra-large.”

“If it's Imperial Ship size, it can easily be loaded.”

“The Sentinel Fleet too.”

“I’ve received the guidance beacon.” Elma said, interrupting Amane and Kiriko’s conversation.

“Well, we’re finally facing the mastermind, but what did he mean by ‘weakened’?”

“We'll just have to wait and see. More importantly, the mission isn't over yet. Don't let your guard down until the very end.”

Following the guidance beacon, Kamidake entered the spaceport located on the uppermost level. Upon passing through the gate, they found themselves in a wooden port similar to the one they’d seen on Jurai, where Seto’s Mikagami was docked.

Seina and the crew passed through several teleportation gates and arrived at a park resembling an observation deck with a panoramic view of the resource planet.

“There she is, that damn old hag… Huh?” Spotting Seto near the fountain, Amane furrowed her brow and started to run, but suddenly stopped in her tracks.

“S-Seto-sama!?”

Kiriko and the others also spotted Seto and let out cries of surprise. There stood the four members of Hakuren’s group, all smiling, and Seto, looking like a manga artist who’d just pulled an all-nighter to meet a deadline, waving weakly. Yet, despite her appearance, Seto’s expression was filled with the joy of liberation.

“Seina-sama!” Gyokuren seemed unable to sit still and started walking toward Seina.

The other three, likely feeling the same way as Gyokuren, followed her all at once.

“Seina-sama, welcome back. We’re so relieved you’re safe.”

In Gyokuren’s dreamy yet utterly sincere gaze, there was none of her usual decadent, aloof, or calculated air. If one were to describe Gyokuren’s current state, she resembled a puppy reunited with its master after a long time apart.

“Gyo, Gyokuren?”

However, Kiriko and the others felt a sense of fear at the sight of Gyokuren.

Gyokuren was the kind of woman who wasn't particularly well-liked by other women, but her overwhelming beauty had the power to overcome that. It meant turning a major negative into an overwhelming positive. However, there were virtually no women who felt uncomfortable with Gyokuren's current appearance. It meant that a major negative had become an overwhelming positive.

“Hey, that’s cheating, isn’t it?”

(You’re one to talk! You’re just as sneaky!!)

Kiriko and Elma glared at Amane, who shared the same stats as Gyokuren, as if she were their sworn enemy. Though in Amane’s case, she really needs to do something about her “old man” attitude...

“I'm so glad everyone is safe.”

Hakuren and her team, who had arrived late, commended Kiriko and the crew for their efforts. However, just like Gyokuren, their attention was focused on Seina.

“Thank you, Hakuren.”

At that moment, Kiriko and the girls on the crew saw their own reflections in Hakuren and her team. It was the same realization they had come to by being separated from Seina, a realization forced upon them by the outsider, Neeju. Of course, their feelings toward Seina were likely at various stages for each individual. However, Gyokuren was the only one with a clear answer; the others were still just getting started, having only just begun to climb that mountain.

(But they do realize which mountain that path leads to, don’t they…? The rest is just a matter of whether they’ll reach the summit or turn back…)

Kiriko felt a twinge of jealousy toward Hakuren and the others, yet at the same time, she felt a strange sense of empathy. Amane and Elma felt the same way.

“Our mission isn’t over yet.”

Neeju, treated as a complete outsider, walked toward Seto while holding Fuku, who was brimming with curiosity about Hakuren and her team.

“Oh, right. I shouldn’t be doing this.”

As Seina began to follow Neeju, the group that had been standing motionless finally started to move.

“Seina-dono, welcome back~~, I’m so glad you’re safe~~, I’m so happy~~, I’ve been waiting for you~~…” Seto said in a voice as soft as a mosquito’s buzz, clinging to him.

“I’m back… but, Seto-sama, are you all right?”

“Sorry about that.”

With that, Seto’s ladies-in-waiting, who had been waiting in the shadows, rushed over and set up a makeshift bed and a small canopy right there.

“...Well then, excuse me for a moment.”

Seto staggered inside and lowered the curtain at the entrance. Instantly, the tent formed a secret wall, and the interior became an accelerated space.

“Now, everyone, this way.”

Hakuren and her team returned to their maid mode and guided Seina and the girls to a large table under a canopy.

Just as Seina and his crew had all taken their seats and the maids had prepared tea and sweets, Seto, who had gotten a good night’s sleep in the accelerated space, arrived with a truly radiant expression.

“I’m sorry for putting you all through so much trouble.”

“In return, though, we got to see something you rarely get to see,” Amane said with a touch of sarcasm, making up for not having been able to complain earlier.

“If that’s all it takes, then it was worth showing you.”

Seto read from the expressions on Kiriko and Elma’s faces that their dissatisfaction with her regarding this mission had subsided, and she smiled broadly. It was bad enough that Hakuren’s group had inflicted more damage than anyone could have imagined; having Kiriko and the others joined the fray on top of that was simply unbearable.

“Well then, once again, thank you for completing the mission. I’ll review the details in a report later… But could you introduce me to that little one?”

At Seto’s words, delighted maids began swarming in from all directions.

“Look, everyone’s been looking forward to meeting her ever since they heard she’s Ryo-chan’s little sister.”

It wasn’t exactly a repeat of the excitement from Ryo-Ohki’s visit, but unless the maids were allowed to vent their desire to see, touch, and hold this adorable little one, they simply wouldn’t be able to get any work done. Of course, there was also the intention of dampening Kiriko and Hakuren's enthusiasm and resetting the situation.

“Myau!”

Seeing the large crowd of people at once, Fuku quickly hid behind Seina.

“It’s okay, Fuku.” Seina said gently, encouraging Fuku to come out, not by forcing her, but by letting her decide for herself.

The maids understood this as well and watched the scene quietly, careful not to startle Fuku.

“……Myau?”

Fuku, who had been intently observing the ladies-in-waiting, gradually let down her guard, but surprisingly, what finally sealed the deal was seeing Seto’s face.

Fuku slowly emerged from behind Seina. With Seina’s help, she climbed onto the table and slowly approached Seto. When she was within reach of Seto's hand, Fuku looked up at Seto's face and wagged her tail.

“Nice to meet you, little one.”

At Fuku’s cue, Seto slowly reached out and picked her up.

“……Myau?”

Fuku felt something about Seto, but she couldn't figure out what it was. However, when she held her close and she felt the warmth of her cheek, she felt an indescribable sense of nostalgia, and she completely let down her guard.

“Myaa, myau!”

Starting with Seto, Fuku was petted and hugged by the court ladies one after another, looking thoroughly delighted. The court ladies who had greeted Fuku, looking satisfied, immediately returned to their posts. However, a slight disturbance occurred when it was Gyokuren’s turn.

Just as Karen, who had been holding Fuku, tried to hand her over to Gyokuren,

“Mya, myau!?” Fuku leapt out of Karen’s arms, landing as if she were falling onto the table, and assumed a posture as if she were wary of Gyokuren.

“Fuku-chan!!?”

“Oh my, she really is a sharp little one, isn’t she?” Gyokuren said with a slightly sad expression as she looked at Fuku.

“Some animals, and sometimes even children, are afraid of Gyokuren…” Hakuren chose her words carefully as she spoke to Kiriko and the others, who were watching the scene with puzzled expressions.

Hearing this, Kiriko and her team immediately recalled the time Seina had accidentally touched upon Gyokuren’s true nature.

“I see... It's no wonder that most animals would instinctively become wary once they realized her true, almost insane nature.” Kiriko whispered to Amane and Elma, making sure Seina couldn’t hear.

However, Seina, unaware of this, listened to Hakuren's words with a puzzled expression.

"Fear? But Fuku doesn't seem to dislike Gyokuren-san at all…"

"Huh? …Oh!"

At Seina's words, among Kiriko and the girls who were staring intently at Fuku, Amane was the first to grasp the meaning of what Seina had said. She realized that even though Fuku was clearly in a defensive posture, both her expression and her tail were the same as when she was happy.

"Hey, Gyokuren, try moving away from Fuku for a moment."

"Huh? Okay."

Gyokuren took a few steps back from Fuku. Then, with a wobbly, stumbling gait, Fuku shuffled forward the exact same distance Gyokuren had retreated.

"Oh my!"

Understanding Amane's intention, Gyokuren repeated the process of approaching and retreating several times. Sure enough, Fuku kept a constant distance from Gyokuren, repeating the cycle of moving away and then coming closer. Seeing this, Gyokuren's expression softened slightly.

"I see… So, it's not that she dislikes you, but rather that her instincts, or her body, are automatically keeping a safe distance."

Hakuren, mindful of the distance between her and Gyokuren, gently picked up Fuku and gave her a welcoming hug.

Gyokuren watched the scene with a slightly resentful look. While she was glad to know she wasn't disliked, it didn't change the fact that she still couldn't touch Fuku.

"I think once she grows up and her reason can control her instincts; you'll be able to hold her." Amane said, as if to comfort Gyokuren.

"I hope so." Just as Gyokuren said with a sigh, Fuku was being handed over to Suiren.

"Nice to meet you." She took Fuku, gave a light kiss to her forehead, and turned to look at Seina.

Seina quickly stood up and came over to Suiren to take Fuku.

"Um… maybe if Fuku-chan were held by Seina-sama…"

Seina understood the meaning behind Suiren's faint whisper. He took Fuku and slowly approached Gyokuren. Of course, he was holding her on his slightly crossed arms so that Fuku could instinctively pull away if she wanted to. However, Fuku didn't run away; instead, she allowed him to move her from the safe distance closer to Gyokuren.

"……"

Gyokuren, looking bewildered, slowly reached out toward Fuku. Ten centimeters, five centimeters, four centimeters, three, two, one centimeter, and then her hand touched Fuku's head. But Fuku didn't run away; she remained on Seina's arm.

"……Phew."

Kiriko and the others, who had been watching the scene with bated breath, all let out a deep sigh of relief at the same time. And as they watched Gyokuren happily stroking Fuku's head, an indescribably warm, gentle smile spread across the faces of everyone present.

"Well then, that wraps up the introductions with the little one. After a two-hour break, Seina-dono and the others, please return to the Academy."

"Um, Seto-sama! I have a question." Seina said as he turned toward Seto, still holding Fuku in his arms.

"Hmm? What is it?"

"Regarding this mission… Could you tell me why Neeju-chan was used as bait?"

There was a hint of anger in Seina's words, but he understood that it wouldn't be enough to sway Seto's resolve. He knew that as long as there were operational secrets involved, asking a question didn't guarantee an answer, and that Neeju likely had her own circumstances that made it impossible for her to refuse. So, at the very least, he was just angry on Neeju's behalf.

"……" Seto remained silent, pretending to think for a moment.

Even though she knew this question wasn't seeking an answer, Gyokuren, Suiren, no, Kiriko and the others, were present. Naturally, they understood both sides' reasoning and perspectives, but it would be troublesome if they perceived her as giving a clumsy answer that teased Seina. It could easily be used as an excuse to refuse future missions, or rather, Seto's little games.

"Heh."

In fact, Gyokuren, for one, was clearly enjoying Seto's inner conflict.

(This is bad. At the very least, I have to get Seina-dono on my side!) With sweat pouring down her back, Seto slowly raised her head.

"Well… regarding this particular incident, I can understand Seina-dono's dissatisfaction. You don't particularly approve of dragging others into your troubles, after all. And that's even more so when it comes to a young girl."

"If possible, I wish you'd consider her safety a little more… I'm still inexperienced myself, so there are no guarantees."

Serving as a decoy was dangerous enough as it was, but entrusting that role to Seina would

attract not only the intended target but other calamities as well. As a result, the level of danger would increase exponentially, making it extremely difficult to protect the decoy in such a situation.

“You did a great job, big brother. We made it here safely, after all. And actually, my mission this time was to investigate you.”

“Me!?”

“She’s a psychic of sorts. I had her investigate the nature of your probability anomalies.”

“Neeju-chan?”

“There’s no one else with abilities like hers. I thought you’d be fine since you have the new Kamidake… but I’ll be as careful as possible from now on.”

“I understand.”

Seto didn’t say, “I’ll make sure it doesn’t happen.” She was merely apologizing for her lack of follow-through; she wasn’t apologizing for the mission itself. However, since Neeju had spoken up in Seto’s defense, Seina was satisfied with that response.

“Well then, Seina-dono and Fuku-chan, a room has been prepared for you, so please rest there. The rest of you have some information to receive, so please stay with us for just a little while longer.”

Seina stood up, bowed, and left the room, led by an attendant.

“Well then… it’s about time.”

As soon as Seina was out of sight, Seto smiled at Neeju. But in the very next instant, Kiriko and the others, who had been smiling moments before, suddenly turned angry and glared at Seto and Neeju.

“You damn old hag!”

Kiriko and the others had appeared to be listening silently to the exchange moments ago, but in reality, Neeju’s power had silenced them to prevent them from saying anything unnecessary to Seina.

“Kiriko! Do you know… what just happened?”

Hakuren and her group, who had been standing there dumbfounded without knowing what was going on, realized upon seeing Kiriko and the other girl’s behavior that this was some kind of deliberate phenomenon.

“Could it be her so-called psychic powers?”

“This loli-grandma can control the direction of a group’s consciousness! With a small group, she can do things like what happened just now.”

“Ah, I see. So that explains the nature of Seina-sama’s probability skew…”

Once they understood the situation, Hakuren and her team quickly regained their composure. In that sense, it was far easier to grasp than Seina’s probability distortion.

“You must realize that objecting to a strategy devised by higher-ups could be fatal for someone in Seina-dono’s position, don’t you?”

“But if it’s just to fulfill Seina-sama’s modest wish, we already have more than enough power.” Gyokuren said nonchalantly, glancing sideways at Seto.

It was Seto, Airi, and Mikami who wanted to keep Seina in his current position. However, if the goal was to fulfill Seina’s wishes, to “stay in space” and “go as far as he can”, they had both the ship and the funds to do so.

“Well... I know that pretense won't work on you, so I'll tell you the truth. As you've all witnessed, you know how dramatically the situation has progressed since Seina-dono came to space, right? Moreover, Seina-dono has incredible mental strength and won't crumble easily.”

“He’s just used to his own misfortune! But when it comes to others…”

“That’s why we have you, and Kamidake. Of course, if that isn’t enough, I’ll increase our personnel and equipment! If money is all it takes, I’ll spend as much as it takes!”

“Seto-sama… you’re being quite blunt, aren’t you?” Amane was beyond astonished; she was actually impressed.

“No matter what you all think, I… no, the world will not let Seina-dono go. People will try to use him for their own selfish purposes, and there are already a staggering number of plans involving him waiting in line. The end of the line isn’t even visible from here… That's right! An absolutely staggering number of plans have become possible thanks to Seina-dono’s appearance! You must be more aware of that fact. If you can’t do that…”

“If you can’t… then you’ll eliminate us, just like this time?” Gyokuren and the rest all glared at Seto.

“Not at all. I’ll just replace you.”

“Replace us? …Oh!”

Currently, Seina had seven aides. Every one of them was a capable individual, but there were plenty of people on Jurai and at the Academy who were even more talented than they were. But there was one person, Kiriko, who was irreplaceable. It wasn’t something that could be made up for by ability; it’s because of her long history with Seina…

“Hehe… There is someone. Just one person… who could take Kiriko-chan’s place.”

“Kiriko's... mother”

“Correct. So, as for replacements for the others, Minaho-chan, Ringo-chan, Mikami-dono, and Kuisu will probably be interested. I also plan to select a few suitable candidates from the senior staff.”

Those were Seto’s mainstays, said to be the galaxy’s strongest intelligence agency. Compared to them, Kiriko and the rest were practically children, the difference was like that between a tiger and a kitten.

“Ah, but just so there’s no misunderstanding, let me make this clear: this is strictly for the mission. I won’t interfere with your private lives.”

“There’s no way I can trust that!”

Since every single one of them had feelings for Seina, there was no way they’d limit their involvement to just the mission. Mikami and Kuisu, of course, and even Tsukiko, who was usually so considerate of her daughter, wouldn’t hold back when it was their turn, and Ringo would likely let her easygoing nature through. Minaho might barely serve as a brake, but given that lineup, it was doubtful how much she’d actually be able to protect Seina.

“Well, that just shows how serious we are. As long as Kiriko-chan and the rest don’t say anything to cause trouble, I think we’ll get along just fine. It’s true that I believe this current lineup is the most ideal for Seina-dono’s sake, so I’ll put up with being bullied every now and then.”

If Seto got serious, Kiriko and the other girls wouldn’t stand a chance. At the very least, Kiriko and the others’ complaints were nothing more than a result of their dependence on Seto.

“Seto-sama, why don’t you cut the bullying of the young girls short and focus on resolving Kiriko-san and the others’ concerns instead?” Neeju, who had been watching Seto’s over-the-top act while stifling a laugh, must have finally felt sorry for Kiriko and the others, for she spoke up to interrupt Seto.

“Have you discovered the true nature of Seina-chan’s power?”

“Hmm, at the very least, it’s not the same ability as mine. And it seems Seina-dono’s consciousness doesn’t hold much influence over the course of events.”

“There was a hypothesis before that things Seina-kun dislikes might occur as probability anomalies.”

“That is one contributing factor, but it is not that simple. For one thing, if that were true, then no unforeseeable events, ones beyond Seina-dono’s knowledge, would ever occur.”

“So, are you saying his power is something we simply cannot control…?”

“That remains to be seen… but at the very least, it means our internal enemies won't have an excuse to confine Seina-dono.”

“At this stage, that’s the more important point.”

“Indeed. Once my political rivals have been eliminated and my own safety is assured, the risks I’ve taken will not have been in vain.” With that, Neeju stood up abruptly.

“Well, it’s time to go, though I’m reluctant to leave. I’ve caused Seina-dono quite a bit of pain, so I must make amends before I return.”

“Make amends?”

×××

A massive container ship was moored in the huge dock. While it looked like an ordinary container ship from the outside, inside it was a first-class armored vessel equipped with facilities on par with a top-tier hotel, built specifically for VIPs.

“Neeju-chan, I’m sorry I put you through all those scary experiences.”

“No, it’s okay. Now I can go back home with peace of mind. It’s all thanks to you, big brother. It’s sad that I can’t say goodbye to Fuku-chan one last time, though…”

Fuku was sleeping in the waiting room right now. Neeju decided it would be better to return without saying goodbye.

“We’ll definitely meet again. Next time, we’ll be able to communicate freely.”

“Okay. Be sure to contact me when you get there.”

“Yeah... You know, big brother... I have a favor to ask...” Neeju began fidgeting shyly.

“A favor? Sure, go ahead. Just ask me anything. If it’s something I can do, I’ll do it for you.”

“Really! Then, when I grow up, if you don’t have anyone else, will you marry Neeju?”

To Seina, it was a perfectly innocent request, but to Kiriko and the others, it carried a completely different, outrageous meaning. Naturally, Neeju’s powers were suppressing their speech to keep them from saying anything out of line.

(Damn it! That loli-granny… Huh!?)

Kiriko and the others, who had been watching this with gritted teeth, forgot their anger when they suddenly saw Seina start to tear up.

“O-Onii-chan!? What’s wrong??” Seeing Seina start to tear up, Neeju was clearly shaken. “Did I ask you to do something too much? I’m sorry… I just…”

“...It’s the first time a girl has ever said something like that to me...”

“Huh?”

“Well, I guess it can’t be helped… Though I’ve often been told things like ‘Don’t come near me’ or ‘Stay away,’ heh heh heh.”

“O-Onii-chan…” Neeju was speechless at that answer, and to confirm what she’d heard, she looked over at Kiriko, just like Amane and the others.

“Yeah… well…” Kiriko nodded slightly, looking troubled.

“……”

Everyone present was moved to tears by Seina’s incredibly tragic past.

About twenty minutes later, the container ship carrying Neeju set off on its return journey to Melmas. Seina saw no reason to refuse Neeju’s request, and so the promise that “Neeju would be his bride when she grew up” was sealed.

“How is that supposed to make up for it?!” Standing a short distance away from Seina as she watched the container ship depart, Amane muttered a sarcastic remark under her breath, making sure Seina couldn’t hear her.

“True, she didn’t say she was making amends to us specifically…”

“More like harassment and a declaration of war against us.”

“Depending on how you interpret it, that could be taken to mean that Melmas is being given to Seina-kun.”

“However, even though she’s eliminated her political rivals, the ultimate decision-making authority hasn’t shifted to Neeju-sama, so I don’t think she’ll be able to act on what she just said so easily.”

“That’s true. With someone of that caliber, the other nations wouldn’t allow her to act freely, not just Melmas…”

“In any case, if Neeju-sama intends to maintain the appearance and age she currently presents to Seina-kun, even if the fixed-age restriction is lifted, it will still take a considerable amount of time for her body to mature.”

“That’s right. Since Neeju-sama has no intention of telling Seina-sama the truth, it will take some time.”

—If we can create a fait accompli in the meantime, we win!

That’s what Kiriko and the rest thought…

(Heh heh heh… You’re so naive, all of you.) Watching Kiriko and the other girls, Seto was smirking to herself.

Chapter Seven: Fuku · Struggle

In one of the massive residential districts within Kamidake, a gigantic bathing facility, made

of the same material as Ryo-Ohki's and Kamidake's crystals and shaped like a puzzle or an RPG dungeon, floated in the air.

Its intricate winding structure resembled an amusement park water ride; by moving walls and blocks, its shape could change in countless ways, allowing a single bath to be partitioned into hundreds of separate baths. Originally, it had been designated as a private bath for Seina, the Master of Kamidake, but because it was so enormous, it had been opened up to everyone onboard.

They found the entrance to this massive bath when they were "exploring" Seina's main residence inside Kamidake.

"Wow, this is just like my grandpa's house."

The mansion, whose scale prompted Amane to say that, was essentially a three-story building, but the ceiling height of a single floor reached nearly twenty meters at its highest, and even standard rooms were nearly ten meters high. In other words, the largest open space, spanning three floors, was likely around eighty meters in diameter when including the dome-shaped structure, evoking the grandeur of a European cathedral.

According to the map generated from measurements taken by NB's probes, the total number of rooms, including those for the staff, currently stood at three hundred for living and workspaces, fifty-three baths, and five hundred toilets, making it a facility on par with a royal palace. The surprisingly low number of rooms was because most of them were for staff and work purposes, and the rooms designated for Seina were not divided into small compartments. The space was as vast as a large exhibition hall, though the interior was far more ornate and intricate. The main residence could be perfectly maintained by the bioroid maids, most of whom had been frozen in time and sealed away by Kiriko and the girls due to ethical concerns.

It was decided to leave the main residence, which was more of a nuisance, untouched for the time being, but the bathtub discovered through the gate there was deemed worthy of use by everyone due to its spectacular view and the sheer joy it promised.

The bath facility could be moved to any of the four massive spaces, and was currently floating above a mountainous region in winter. Of course, thanks to its shielding function, it was unaffected by the cold, and Seina was enjoying his bath while gazing at the scenery spread out before him.

(It really is nice.)

Near Seina, Fuku was swimming happily in the hot spring water.

After parting ways with Neeju, Fuku woke up some time later and frantically searched for her, but when she realized she was nowhere to be found, she clung to Seina and cried. However, upon receiving a message from Neeju after she arrived at Melmas, Fuku learned they could communication anytime and regained her composure.

"It feels nice, doesn't it, Fuku?"

“Myaa!”

“But it’s almost time to head out, so let’s go.”

Seina stretched widely in the bathtub and stood up. Having returned from Neeju’s mission, Seina and the others had been conducting repeated familiarization drills on the ship, following Airi’s orders, who had viewed the situation as a problem, to overcome the issues with the new Kamidake model.

“……Mii.”

But Fuku’s expression had completely changed from the cheerful one she’d had just moments ago to one of anxiety. Seeing this, Seina sat down on the edge of the bathtub and gazed at Fuku.

“I’m sorry… If I hadn’t been doing this kind of work, I wouldn’t have had to make you feel scared.”

Fuku, who was listening intently to Seina’s words, clambered out of the tub and began walking toward the teleportation gate as if leading the way.

Then, turning back toward Seina, “Myaa…” She meowed as if to call out to Seina.

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A low alarm sounded on the Kamidake’s bridge, and the crew shifted into combat readiness.

“One ship sighted. Confirmed as a registered pirate vessel! Identification Level 05.”

Simply put, the identification level indicated the strength of the pirate ship. It was divided into ten tiers, with lower numbers indicating greater strength.

“That’s the level where they operate solo and engage in piracy.”

“The enemy vessel is heading this way!”

Currently, the Kamidake was disguised as a small container ship.

“Mii...” Fuku let out a worried cry.

“Power output is dropping.”

“Fuku, it's okay. There's nothing to be afraid of.” Seina spoke gently to Fuku, who was staring intently at him.

“Enemy ship firing! It’s a warning shot!”

Just as Elma said, the attack passed right in front of the Kamidake.

“Mya!”

Fuku's body stiffened reflexively. Her face was already contorted, and her eyes were brimming with tears. Given the slightest provocation, she would likely throw herself into Seina's lap.

"It's just one ship. It's okay!"

"Mya! Myaa!"

Fuku, flustered by Amane's scolding, tried to focus her attention and glared at the monitor showing the enemy ship. But the moment two attacks fired from the enemy ship passed right by Kamidake, she froze in place, unable to move.

"The link value with the ship is dropping rapidly!"

In the next instant, all the monitors on the bridge went blank.

"Switching to Pattern B!"

Thanks to Kiriko's quick reflexes, the monitors and controls came back online just as the Kamidake was under attack from the enemy ship and its camouflage was beginning to fade.

"Mya! Myaaaaaaaaa!!" Fuku leapt into Seina's lap and began to cry, trembling.

"Camouflage lost! The enemy ship…"

"The enemy ship has jumped into hyperspace!" Elma shouted, cutting off Amane's words.

"Damn it! We let them get away." Amane said with a look of frustration and leaned back deeply in her chair.

"The exterior and vibration pattern data... I wonder if they recorded it?"

"That kind of data is bound to be recorded eventually, so there's nothing we can do about it. Still… honestly, I'd have preferred to wait a little longer."

"It is distinctive, after all… this ship. It'll be troublesome if people notice the similarities to Ryo-Ohki."

If it became known that the crystals used in the hull matched those of Ryo-Ohki, it would certainly attract a lot of interest. As a result, if it were discovered that they couldn't control the ship properly, they'd risk becoming a target for pirates. And if, by any chance, they were captured, it would be a major crisis.

"You're right. Anyway, we have to do something before the enemy starts gathering concrete intelligence." Kiriko sighed and gazed at Fuku, who was being held by Seina.

"Well, we still have time. Let's move on."

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A few hours later, in a section of space slightly removed from where they had been, intense

bursts of fire lit up the sky like a torrential downpour. The plasma reacting with Kamidake's shields, disguised as a worn-out container ship, glowed as if a giant umbrella had been unfurled. However, despite the attack's flashy appearance, it had caused almost no damage to Kamidake's shields.

"All enemy ships are registered pirate vessels. Highest rank, identification level 08."

"Wait, Level 08? That's just a junk ship cobbled together by an amateur as a hobby. And yet…" Amane looked at the monitor in front of her, looking somewhat bewildered.

It showed that all weapon control systems were currently inoperable.

"Going to the trouble of disguising ourselves just to lure in low-rank pirates and ending up like this… this might be pretty serious."

Everyone on the bridge stared at Fuku, who was clinging to Seina and crying.

"Myaa! Myaa! Myaaan!!"

"Energy output dropping! Link value with the hull has fallen below the minimum threshold. Switching all controls to manual!"

"Are we retreating?"

"Even if they're low-ranking, they're still pirates. I think we should apprehend them…" Seina said as he glanced briefly at Fuku, who was crying.

"That's a piece of cake."

"Then, please proceed."

"Roger! Disabling camouflage!"

At Kiriko's signal, Kamidake's camouflage was removed. By the time the pirates realized that what they had been attacking was no ordinary vessel, all their ships were either disabled or had lost their hyperspace capabilities. They were then apprehended by the GP ships that had rushed to the scene.

Watching the monitor feed from the Kamidake's bridge, Mikami let out a deep sigh. Seeing Fuku crying in fear of the pirates' attack was heartbreaking to watch, and even Mikami looked a little flustered.

"I meant to assess Seina-kun's potential, but it ended up having quite the unintended side effect. It really is a shame for Fuku-chan."

"That's just part of the trial. Since she's going to be Seina-kun's partner, if she can't overcome troubles like this, their partnership will eventually fall apart."

“Heh heh, that’s a rather cold way of putting it.” Mikami glanced sideways at Airi with a knowing look. It was the look of a mother watching her sulking daughter.

“But that little brat glared at me and growled! There’s nothing I can do about it!”

“I think it’s because you tried to give that little girl a suspicious-looking collar.”

“What?! How do you know that??”

When Seina and the girls had returned from their mission with Neeju, Airi had tried to put the collar on Fuku under the guise of a birthday present, only to have her run away. Airi scanned the secretaries working nearby, trying to figure out who had let the cat out of the bag.

“It’s not that I knew, I just noticed. As I’ve always told you, Airi-sama, you wear your emotions on your sleeve. If you try to give a collar with that ‘something’s up’ look on your face, anyone who isn’t completely oblivious would notice.”

As if to agree with Mikami’s words, the secretaries all glared at Airi. She looked a little embarrassed and hid by making her monitor invisible.

“...It’s really not a big deal. I just thought I’d put her to sleep when she was getting in the way.”

“Well, I figured it was something like that… though back then, it seemed like Fuku-chan growled not because she noticed the mechanism, but because she was scared by Airi-sama’s smile, which was practically dripping with ulterior motives. Ho ho ho ho ho.”

“That’s a lie! There’s no way I’d make a face like that…”

With a swift motion, Airi played back the surveillance footage from that moment, and then fell silent. In other words, she was convinced just by seeing it herself.

“As for Fuku-chan, maybe we should get her some psychiatric advice?”

Airi remained silent for a moment in response to Mikami’s question, but “...I don’t think that’s possible. You know that don’t you?” she replied in a voice that was barely more than a whisper.

“Well, I suppose we’ll just have to wait and see for a while… I hope things work out.”

“Oh, don’t you actually prefer it to fail?”

“Why is that?”

“Because then you'll be able to join Tsukiko-chan and the others on Seina-kun's crew, right?”

As if to get back at him for everything that had happened, Airi glared at Mikami with a scowl. But her gaze was also filled with envy, and if anything, she looked more like a sulking child.

“Oh my, what a troublesome person you are. You know I have a role I have to fulfill here, don’t you? Besides, I’m not that mean.”

“Balancing both would be a piece of cake for you, wouldn’t it!”

“Well, I do have someone right here who’s as high maintenance as a child.”

“If it’s up to you, almost everyone at the Academy is treated like a child, aren’t they?”

“I mean you’re particularly high-maintenance, ho ho ho.”

At Mikami’s words, the secretaries who had been eavesdropping nodded in unison.

“Ugh! You lot, stop eavesdropping and get back to work!” Airi stood up and shouted

The secretaries seemed to take that as a challenge and filled the monitors around her with layer upon layer of documents awaiting approval, leaving not a single gap. To Airi, it was like a talisman to seal away a demon.

“Aaaaaaaah, I'm sooo sorry!!”

It worked like a charm. Airi started working while crying.

Mikami, watching the scene while stifling a laugh, suddenly glanced toward the Academy’s main planet, where Seina and his crew were.

(……That’s right. If Minami had been a little more reliable, **I** might have joined the team right away. Hehe.)

Having finished their test voyage on Kamidake, Seina and the girls had returned to Amane’s apartment at the Academy. Although they could be self-sufficient on Kamidake, they felt that a normal lifestyle would be better for Fuku’s emotional development.

Seina emerged from the elevator at the entrance, holding Fuku in his arms.

He gently stroked Fuku’s head as she looked downcast and said, “Everyone makes mistakes. Don’t worry about it. Right, Fuku?”

“Myuu…”

But Fuku remained dejected, shrinking even smaller in Seina’s arms.

Even though she was young, Fuku was fully aware, in her own way, that she was at fault. That’s why the comfort offered by Seina, Kiriko, and Amane wasn’t quite enough to lift her spirits. At times like this, the best remedy was to change the environment and atmosphere itself.

“Welcome home.”

Seina and the girls were greeted by Hakuren and the other three, all smiling.

Since it was decided that it would be best not to change the staff too much until Fuku and

Kamidake's adjustments were complete, Hakuren's group were still working as maids at Amane's apartment, just as before, and they were the ones who completely transformed the gloomy atmosphere surrounding Seina and the others.

"Welcome home, Fuku-chan."

Karen snatched Fuku from Seina's arms, leaving the welcoming duties to Gyokuren, and, together with Hakuren and Suiren, surrounded Fuku with a deliberately cheerful atmosphere as they entered the house. This cheerfulness was lifting Fuku's spirits.

"Well then, let's go take a bath first."

Acting almost like high school girls, Karen and the girls chattered excitedly as they headed toward the large bathhouse.

Since the Seiryo incident had damaged the large bathhouse, they'd renovated the interior and facilities a bit, separating the changing rooms by gender. Of course, there were no partitions in the bathing area itself, but Seina used a small tub screened off with potted plants, while the women used the rest of the space. Previously, they'd staggered their times, but since Fuku had joined as a resident, it had become customary for everyone to bathe together unless there was a special reason not to.

Seina, mindful of the women's chatter, stretched out his arms and legs as far as they would go in the bath, which, though small, was still about four and a half tatami mats in size.

(With Fuku here, I can stay calm even in a situation like this...)

Most of the women's conversations and reactions revolved around Fuku. But when Fuku wasn't there, the atmosphere suddenly took on a more suggestive tone. It was especially troublesome when Amane, Gyokuren, and Elma would start conversations, often involving the other women, that seemed designed to tease Seina. As it was, the young Seina felt nervous and self-conscious just knowing that Kiriko and the other girls were in the same bath with him. Even the slightest sounds, the splashing of water, the sound of bodies being washed, or their breathing, were enough to make him aware of them.

To make matters even worse, and this was something he'd only recently realized, due to the effects of Bio-Enhancement, when he closed his eyes and concentrated, his hearing became incredibly sensitive, granting him a sense of perception akin to a bat's echolocation. In other words, even though he couldn't see them, he could vaguely perceive the situation in three dimensions. That state, which was akin to seeing their blurred, naked bodies through the steam, causes all sorts of trouble for Seina.

"Migyaa!" With a rustling sound as the houseplants were pushed aside, Fuku jumped into the bathtub where Seina was.

Whenever the women's doting behavior escalated, Fuku fled to Seina. That was because it was a safe zone where the women couldn't enter.

"Huu! Huu! Huuu…"

Seina gently stroked the excited Fuku to calm her down, and Fuku rubbed her cheek against Seina's, acting all affectionate. Then, once her excitement had cooled off enough…

"Fuku-chaaan, let's play~~!"

"Mya, myaaa~~~n♡" As if answering the women's calls, she happily ran off in their direction.

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"Still, this is a real headache… We've got this ship, but we can't make any use of its capabilities at all."

After bathing and eating, Kiriko and the others, now dressed casually, were relaxing in the living room.

"For Fuku-chan, it seems the act of being attacked itself is what terrifies her, rather than the power or accuracy of the attack, so it looks like it'll be hard to overcome."

"So the quickest solution is just to wait for Fuku to grow up…" As Amane grumbled, she noticed that Seina looked uncomfortable.

"H-hey... This isn't your fault Seina's..."

"Seina-sama, Seina-sama!" Karen exclaimed up, as if coming to the rescue.

"Look, look at Fuku-chan."

Where Karen was pointing, Fuku was being held by Gyokuren and wagging her tail.

"I've been getting her used to it little by little every day. I finally managed to hold her." Gyokuren smiled with genuine delight. It was a gentle, sincere smile, a rare sight for her.

While Gyokuren's beauty usually shone brightest when she was a bit decadent and venomous, it was this version of Gyokuren that Seina found attractive. Her usual self exuded a sense of destructive pleasure, but this smile inspired a feeling bordering on worship. It was as if she had transformed from a demon into a moon goddess, and if Gyokuren had so desired, she possessed the power to make everyone present bow down before her.

"Good for you, Fuku." Seina was the only one who seemed relatively unfazed, and he walked over toward Gyokuren.

Watching this, Amane let out a small sigh.

"Good grief… It would be more exciting if we could see some progress in combat, too."

Thanks to Seina, Amane was the first to snap out of her momentary paralysis. And those words served as a wake-up call for Kiriko and Elma, who had been staring blankly at Gyokuren.

"Pirates and Gyokuren… both inspire an instinctive fear, but in this case, we actually have a mutual fondness for each other."

Kiriko's words could have served as a hint for overcoming their fear of the pirates of Fuku, but at that moment, they didn't realize it.

"Her potential is incredibly high, but if she's this unstable… In that sense, the old Kamidake was actually better in terms of reliability."

"The old Kamidake? Hmm… I suppose that's our only option."

"Huh? You're not planning to revive Unit One, are you?"

"No, not at all. I mean we should use the relay unit to operate at least the necessary parts completely manually." Kiriko began speaking in a low voice so that Seina and Fuku couldn't hear.

She did this to spare them from unnecessary worry and stress. She especially didn't want to put any extra pressure on Fuku, who was still on edge, even after they got home.

"Ah, I see, I see. The Academy does have the best technology, after all. Well, I suppose we'll just have to make do with that for the time being."

"Let's get started tomorrow. Elma, could you borrow some equipment from Airi-sama's workshop for us?"

"Airi-sama's workshop is classified at such a high security level that even taking out a single part involves a lot of tedious paperwork. I think the quickest solution would be to explain the situation to Airi-sama and bring the Kamidake into the workshop…"

"That sounds like it could cause a big problem in itself. After all, she was trying to put a suspicious collar on Fuku."

"If we're not careful, Fuku-chan might start causing a ruckus over there."

"Even before that, she might oppose this plan."

"Huh? Why?"

"Since Airi-sama is a philosopher, she might not approve of relying on other methods if she can't fully utilize the function... Especially since Kamidake was created by Hakubi Washu-sama, she might think that way even more."

"That sounds like something Airi-sama would say. Still, it's true that Fuku has a lot of unstable factors, and on top of that, we have to factor in Seina's probability bias, so I guess it can't be helped?"

"True. Since the situation won't wait for us until we've mastered it, we'll just have to fill the gap in a different way."

"If we were to proceed without telling Airi-sama, what exactly would we do?"

"I have a good idea. If I ask my comrades from when we hunted humans, I think we can get

pretty advanced equipment, though not quite as advanced as Airi-sama's workshop."

"I see. Those guys probably have plenty of suspicious-looking stuff lying around… But since it involves Seina, are you sure it's okay?"

"Heh. Well, for better or worse, I've been through that once before. They'll probably choose something appropriate for the situation."

"In that case, what about NB? If we take him along, it'll be an open secret."

"Let's explain the situation to Hakuren-san and the others and ask for their cooperation. Either way, if Fuku-chan gets into a fight, it'll just get in the way of our data collection."

"Well, let's get started. Let's make a list of what we need right away."

With that, Kiriko and Elma gave Hakuren and the others a subtle signal. Pretending to head to the kitchen or the bathroom so Seina wouldn't notice, they each made their way to Amane's room.

Chapter Eight: Troublemakers and Legends

When one thinks of outlaws like pirates, taverns come to mind, but in space, the places where pirates gathered are those with abundant water and trees. For those who lived in space and rarely set foot on a planet, that was the ultimate luxury. And there, alcohol, women, men, food, entertainment, rest, and safety were all commodities.

On her way home from work, Komachi Kyō had come to a tavern with a small natural dome, accompanied by her subordinates.

"A ship that looks a lot like Ryo-Ohki, huh… Is that reliable intel?"

Leaning back on a water sofa in casual attire, Komachi downed a mug of draft beer in one gulp. The water sofa Komachi was leaning against also served as an aquarium, with colorful fish swimming inside.

"Footage has been released, so I think it's definitely accurate."

Surrounding Komachi were subordinates who appeared to be high-ranking officers. On a monitor displayed by one of them, the Kamidake was shown, its camouflage peeling away after coming under attack.

"A crystal ship, huh? The materials certainly look very similar. But…"

It was clear that it was a special ship, but judging by the footage, the pilot's skills were far from impressive.

"That's exactly what I'm getting at. There are people claiming that's the ship belonging to Yamada Seina."

“What?” Komachi, who had been listening with skepticism, leaned forward involuntarily.

“A deserter from the GP, and part of the original Kamidake crew involved in that mess Tarrant caused the other day…”

“Where is that guy now?”

“Sorry to keep you waiting~~” Just then, Alan, dressed as a waiter, arrived carrying their food.

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“Ryo-Ohki and Jurai were in contact?”

“Heh heh heh, that’s not all. Ryo-Ohki’s computer core happens to be a little girl. And apparently, she’s acquainted with Yamada Seina.” Alan explained with an overly fawning attitude and a strangely subservient tone.

Standing on either side of him were Barry and Cohen, also dressed as waiters.

“Acquaintances…”

“Kamidake was battered to pieces during that operation. It was in such bad shape that it’d be better to scrap it than repair it. I don’t think they can fix it in such a short time anyway, and since it was an experimental ship to begin with, I suppose they’ll just collect the data and call it a day.”

“So, that’s the ship they received on Jurai? But you guys didn’t actually see it, did you?”

“It’s just a theory, mind you. But a ship with such distinctive features isn’t exactly common, and considering it’s a GP camouflaged ship, I’d say it’s the most likely candidate. Heh heh heh.”

“I see.” Komachi listened to Alan’s explanation and nodded.

It was half speculation based on the situation, but it made sense and was quite convincing.

“Still, how do you explain that shoddy ship handling?”

“Ha! We were the ones holding Kamidake together, you see. Originally, no one wanted to pilot it because they were afraid of Yamada Seina’s bad luck, so we went through a lot of trouble to keep it running.”

“Are you saying it turned out that way because you guys weren’t there?”

“They’re a bunch of fools. By now, they’re probably regretting how they treated us.”

“I see.” Komachi said dismissively as she turned her face away from Alan and his crew.

As for that explanation, it was a classic example of pathetic self-aggrandizement.

(If what these guys are saying is true, then it’s not a matter of piloting skills, but some kind of system issue? Maybe Ryo-Ohki’s central system is somehow related to its appearance as a

little girl…)

“By the way, Komachi-sama, would you be interested in hiring us? Despite appearances, we have plenty of combat experience , and we even managed to break through that Tarrant blockade. Above all…” Alan lowered his voice and flashed a sly grin. “We’ve got all sorts of other information as well…”

“I see. Hey!” As if to cut Alan off, Komachi called out to a subordinate standing a short distance away.

“Take these guys to the ship right away. They’re guests, so be polite.”

“Thank you very much! Happy to be of service, hehehe!”

“Come on, this way!” The subordinate grabbed Alan, who was trying to cozy up to Komachi, and dragged him away.

Barry and Cohen followed behind, being herded along by two other subordinates.

“Are you sure about this? Judging by their profiles, those guys are notorious troublemakers. Though, honestly, you can tell at a glance they’re no good.” The subordinate standing next to her watched Alan and the others leave with a look of distaste.

“That’s why we keep them isolated. Staring at those faces for too long ruins my drink.”

“That’s certainly true.”

“Besides, the information on those guys is a bit dangerous… If they start spilling the beans elsewhere, it’ll cause chaos within the guild. If that ship really belongs to that kid, it’d be like willingly increasing the number of people walking into a trap.”

“But it seems those guys were blabbing all over the place just for a little cash.”

“Once the source of information disappears, it’ll be limited to either gawkers acting on half-baked rumors or those who actually have some information.”

“So you’re saying it’s a good thing that Tarrant’s influence is being weakened?” The subordinate lowered his voice and whispered.

“You understand, don’t you?”

“I’ll issue a directive to my subordinates not to act rashly based on this information.”

“Still, I was surprised by Ryo-Ohki’s reappearance, but now there’s all this commotion over a sister ship…” The slightly elderly man emptied his cup with a look of amusement.

The reappearance of Ryo-Ohki, which had been believed to have been destroyed in a mutual kill with the Jurian Crown Prince, came as a huge shock to the pirates, and the rumor had spread in the blink of an eye.

“But why is Ryo-Ohki, who attacked Jurai, now in contact with Jurai?”

“Surprisingly little is known, but Ryo-Ohki… or rather, the woman named Ryoko, was working for a man named Kagato, and they specialized in looting ruins and archaeological artifacts. The reason she attacked Jurai was likely because she was targeting an Imperial Ship… or, according to one theory, the ship said to be the progenitor of them all.”

“The progenitor?”

“Imperial Ships have first and second generations, right? So, what’s above the first generation?”

“Ah, I see. So, is this Kagato the one who built Ryo-Ohki?”

“That’s the mystery… Actually, what kind of person do you think could build a ship capable of fighting on equal footing with an Imperial Ship?”

“What kind of person…? Well, a scientist of a certain caliber…!! The Academy!”

“Exactly! And considering that no ship on par with Ryo-Ohki has been announced yet, the leading theory right now is that the most likely candidate is Hakubi Washu, the Academy’s top philosopher who went missing.”

“So, does that mean that Kagato is either connected to Hakubi Washu or is Hakubi Washu herself?”

“There's no way she's him. Ever since Ryo-Ohki went missing with the Crown Prince of Jurai, Kagato has apparently been acting alone for seven hundred years.”

“I see. If he were the creator, he could probably make as many new ones as he wanted.”

“Or maybe he needed some kind of special material, though. …By the way,” As the middle-aged man began to speak, he displayed an image of a woman walking side-by-side with Hakubi Washu.

I’m sure you’ve all heard her name at least once. The woman with Hakubi Washu, her name is Akara Naja.”

“Akara Naja? Ah, I’ve heard the name. But it’s only something I’d recall if you mentioned it… she didn’t really leave much of an impression on me.”

“Well… Akara Naja mostly just played a supporting role to Hakubi Washu, and she died five thousand years ago, so it’s no wonder she didn’t leave much of an impression… But if you heard about the royalties from the patents she donated to the Academy before she went missing, you’d be surprised.” The middle-aged man’s face looked incredibly pleased, and even a bit smug.

“Is it really that impressive?”

“They say the Academy's revenue is dozens of times that of Jurai or Seniwa, but according to

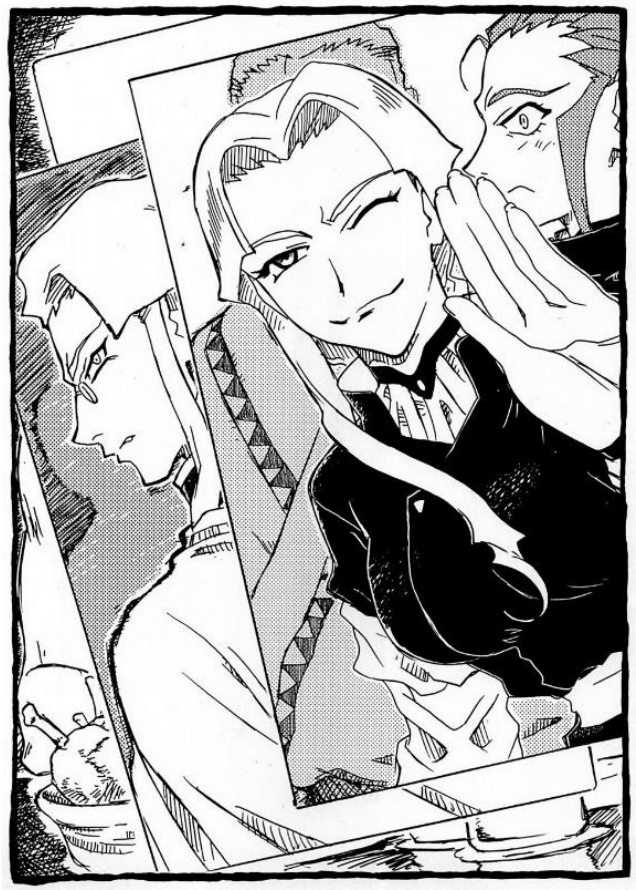
last year's financial report, Akara Naja's patent revenue apparently accounted for about 4% of the total."

"Whoa! ...Seriously?? That's nearly 10% of the national budgets of Jurai and Seniwa?!"

"That's on the level of a decent-sized country's national budget… Yeah, that's definitely impressive." Komachi, who had been listening quietly until then, leaned forward in surprise.

"Hakubi Washu holds by far the most patents among the Philosophers, with Akara Naja in second place. They say that record won't be broken unless some extraordinary genius appears in the future."

"...So? What does Akara Naja have to do with this story?"



"Oh, I'm sorry. I got carried away and went off on a tangent. Actually, I'd like you to compare that with this photo." The middle-aged man displayed another photo of a man and placed it next to Naja's. "This is a photo of Kagato. What do you think… do you sense anything?"

"……Now that you mention it… They do look alike. Could they be related?" Komachi, who had been staring intently at the photo, glanced around at the other executives.

They nodded in agreement with Komachi's assessment.

"Although the Academy has officially denied it, comparing skeletal and voice data extracted from the footage has revealed a high probability that they are siblings or parent and child."

"Assuming Hakubi Washu is Ryo-Ohki's creator, that means Kagato had help acquiring Ryo-Ohki… But if that's the case, isn't it possible that Akara Naja was the one who created Ryo-Ohki?"

"There's another mystery there, you see. According to records, there is no one named Kagato enrolled at the Academy…"

The next image shown was of Washu, an elderly man, and a baby.

"What's this photo? I've seen that man somewhere before."

"The clue is a bank."

“Ah! Isn’t that the founder of MMD?” One of the youngest executives asked.

“Correct. But how did you even know he was the founder of MMD?”

“You aren’t thinking of becoming a member, are you?”

The executives all burst out laughing. But it wasn’t out of mockery; it was more like the affectionate smile one gave a child trying to imitate an adult. Because that was something every single one of them dreamed of achieving someday.

“Well, whether you can become like the boss depends on how hard you work from now on.” The middle-aged executive spoke gently to the young executive, who looked embarrassed.

Many pirates also had business dealings with the Galactic Federation. Quite a few even did business with major corporations and the Academy. Of course, those who did not belong to the Galactic Federation could not become official members, but they could become unofficial MMD members upon recommendation from a full member. Therefore, becoming an unofficial member had become a sort of status symbol among pirates, signifying that one was involved in such significant business dealings. Komachi was one of them.

“Now, this man, Ikuma, was the Academy’s top philosopher before Hakubi Washu appeared, and he was also the mentor of Hakubi Washu and Akara Naja… Ah, let me add a bit of context first, don’t forget that Akara Naja is practically in the same class as Hakubi Washu. So, regarding that earlier photo, there’s more to the story…” The middle-aged man displayed a series of different photos one after another, flipping through them as if showing an animated sequence.

In them, while Ikuma remained the same, the baby girl gradually grew up.

“This girl… Akara Naja!?”

“No, wait. Hakubi Washu was in the first photo.”

“Since you showed the photos in sequence, that means the baby and that woman are the same person, right? …So that means she’s Akara Naja’s daughter?”

“That's what I've heard, but there's no proof. The private lives of the Philosophy Department’s faculty are generally shrouded in mystery, but since Akara Naja was apparently quite a prominent figure, there are various records left behind in student newspapers and personal journals from that time. However, there are no official records, or even rumors, suggesting that Akara Naja had a lover or was pregnant. As for this baby, all we know is that Hakubi Washu apparently entrusted her to Professor Ikuma.”

“A mysterious girl, huh... So, how is she connected to this?”

“Actually, this girl’s name is… Kagato.”

“Huh? But her appearance and gender are completely different.” The young executive, comparing the footage, tilted his head in confusion.

“Plastic surgery… or maybe she underwent body modification? But since the name is the same, it’s highly likely she’s the same person.”

“She could have just used an alias, but since she went out of her way to use the same name, it’s highly likely.”

“Actually, there are quite detailed records of the incident involving the male Kagato when he was placed on the GP’s wanted list…” The middle-aged man displayed detailed information about Kagato’s case, extracted from the GP database.

“Whoa! This is a pretty famous case, anyone interested in history would know about it.” One of the executives looked intently at the article with a pleased expression.

“Come to think of it, wasn’t it Kagato who wiped out that whole planet, along with the Federation brass and the GP fleet that came to rescue them? Yeah, yeah, I remember now.”

“Ah, I know that story too. Apparently, those brats were a bunch of ill-mannered little shits who were getting into criminal-like trouble on some backwater planet. I remember reading an article about how, even though they were the kind of idiots the GP should have been cracking down on, they were let off the hook just because they were the kids of powerful people, and it really made me feel better.”

“As for the male Kagato, his background prior to that is completely unknown. And Ryo-Ohki didn’t appear until after the male Kagato showed up. But the clue was right nearby, on that vanished planet.”

“Could this have something to do with Hakubi Washu?”

“Exactly! Apparently, there was a unique ecosystem there, and Hakubi Washu had a research facility there specifically for studying it.”

“Biology, huh... I always thought a Philosopher was someone who came up with weird inventions.”

“You idiot! Philosophers are people who synthesize research results from various fields to develop new inventions and applications. That’s why they have to be well-versed in everything. Well, ‘philosopher’ is practically a synonym for ‘genius,’ after all.”

“So, could they have been building Ryo-Ohki there?”

“Since Ryo-Ohki is a kind of living spaceship, that’s highly likely. It would be helpful to know what that unique ecosystem was like, but the planet itself exploded, and no records remain… Also, there’s testimony that Akara Naja’s daughter, after growing up, worked alongside Hakubi Washu as her assistant for a short time.”

“So, that means she was on that destroyed planet too…”

At those words, the middle-aged man nodded.

“I see… There are still many unknowns, but it’s a convincing theory.”

“Whether you believe it or not is up to you, though.”

“Is this the punchline to an urban legend?”

The middle-aged man’s remark instantly eased the tense atmosphere, and laughter broke out.

“...Hey, hey, you’re not telling me all those photos and stories were made up, are you?”

“This information was provided by a notorious philosopher who was a classmate of Hakubi Washu and Akara Naja.”

“A notorious philosopher? Philosophers are already a bunch of weirdos, you know. Isn’t that exactly the kind of thing where it’s up to you whether you believe it or not?”

“Hakubi Washu is a super-famous figure that most people know, so there are plenty of researchers specializing in her. That’s why almost all the information we’ve had so far has been verified. However, the idea that Hakubi Washu might have created Ryo-Ohki is purely speculation based on the circumstances.”

“I see. It might indeed fall into the category of urban legends.”

“Oh! Hey, I just searched the Academy’s website, and apparently there’s been an increase in sightings of Hakubi Washu at the Academy recently. Though, of course, that’s also at the urban legend level.” The young officer exclaimed cheerfully.

“But when you combine that with sightings of a ship that looks a lot like Ryo-Ohki, it starts to sound pretty credible.”

“That’s quite a coincidence… Ryo-Ohki making contact with Jurai. That kid and Ryo-Ohki know each other…”

“It’s also intriguing that the sightings of Hakubi Washu at the Academy and Ryo-Ohki’s return happened almost simultaneously.”

“Oh! Speaking of Ryo-Ohki, I haven’t heard any rumors lately about its owner, Kagato.”

“True... According to the database, the last time Soja was seen was a few years ago while they were on the move, and there’s been no word since. At least neither our guild nor the GP have suffered any damage that fits the profile, but now that Ryo-Ohki has returned, they’re bound to make a move. More than that, it’s a mystery why Ryoko hasn’t shown up even though Ryo-Ohki has returned.”

“I’m pretty sure they said Ryo-Ohki has a core form that looks like a little girl.”

“Right! If Ryoko was defeated and only Ryo-Ohki remained, that would explain the contact with Jurai and the description of a ship that looks so much like it.”

“That’s a possibility. If that’s the case, they could build a sister ship even without Hakubi Washu.”

(……I wonder how Ryoko is doing?)

Komachi suddenly recalled Ryoko Balta, who shared the same name as Ryoko. Knowing the relationship between Ryoko and Elma, Komachi was aware that Ryoko was still alive. Of course, the higher-ups and Tarrant knew this as well, but since they had effectively written her off the moment they ordered Seina's assassination, they had no intention of publicly acknowledging her survival now, nor of treating her as a traitor. Above all, the subordinates taken hostage and their families were already under Juraian protection. If they made a clumsy move and it became public that Ryoko had been sacrificed and her crews' families taken hostage, it could lead to distrust in the Guild. Regardless of certain criminals or behind-the-scenes power struggles, the vast majority of Guild members, even if called pirates, were, from the Galactic Federation's perspective, essentially just ordinary people. And the Guild was their country.

(If I could just get in touch with her, things would become clear… but I suppose that's not going to happen.)

She was now on the enemy side. Moreover, given her close relationship with Yamada Seina, she likely wouldn't readily reveal the truth, and if Komachi were to make contact carelessly, it might jeopardize Ryoko's position at the Academy.

"……Hm? Come to think of it, that boy's background is the same as the First Jurian Empress, isn't it……"

"Yes. She's the Crown Prince's mother, the one who fought to the death with Ryo-Ohki… Hmm?" The middle-aged man began to stare intently, deep in thought.

"If the First Empress's son was the one that went missing along with Ryo-Ohki… If Ryoko were gone and only the ship's hull remained…"

"What are you getting at?"

"It means Ryo-Ohki might have been the reason Yamada Seina, an early-civilization human, was allowed to go into space as a special exception. Ryo-Ohki was discovered at the same time as Yamada Seina, who possesses unique abilities. And if both of them were brought back to the Academy as research subjects, it would make perfect sense."

"So you mean… as a weapon?"

"He certainly has that kind of power."

"That kid as a weapon, huh…" Komachi recalled the moment she first met Seina, and a smile spread across her face. "Hahaha! That kid, a weapon? He didn't give off that kind of vibe at all."

"So your gut feeling tells you that's not the case?"

"Well, yeah."

At Komachi's words, the middle-aged man's expression softened.

Her subordinates' trust in Komachi was absolute. This stemmed not only from her character but also from her keen intuition and sound judgment. Komachi had always been a serious and conscientious person. If she acknowledged and accepted someone, her subordinates trusted that person unconditionally.

"Hah, if the boss says so, then I suppose that's how it is. Well, from our perspective, that's certainly welcome news. After all, wrapping things up in your own mind to suit your convenience can lead to overlooking hidden dangers."

"Well, that was quite an interesting story. But let's leave that topic there. It's dangerous to believe predictions without accurate information."

"By the way, what are we going to do about the people who provided that information?"

"That's the problem… Lately, I've been stuck looking after nothing but weirdos."

"Hah, you mean Seiryo, right?"

"...Seriously, dealing with him is exhausting. I totally get why the Academy created that Tennan Special Provision." Komachi clenched her fists so hard they trembled.

The worries that Amane used to carry were now weighing on Komachi. But since she hadn't yet reached the point where she could vent her frustration the way Amane did, the stress was taking a heavy toll on her.

"Why not just team him up with that group from earlier? You seem to get along surprisingly well with them, and you'd probably be able to keep them in check pretty easily."

"You mean those guys?" For a moment, Komachi imagined that scenario and suddenly burst into fits of laughter.

Alan and his crew, groveling to the point of self-deprecation, and Seiryo (that idiot), who accepted it all as a matter of course. Plus, Seiryo had a vitality that meant he wouldn't just be used as a convenient tool by Alan and the others, it was a perfect combination.

"Heh heh heh… That's a great idea." Komachi said cheerfully.

But it would be some time before she realized that this combination was missing the crucial human element to act as the brakes and steering wheel.

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Alan and his crew, brought aboard Komachi's ship, were dropped off on the lowest floor of the central elevator. It was a circular space with several rooms arranged around the elevator.

"This is your room." One of the men who had guided them unlocked a door and opened it.

"Could this be…?" Alan hesitated and stopped in his tracks.

The entire floor was quite clean and, at first glance, looked like the crew quarters, but the

interior visible through the door was bare and bleak, with no furniture. Moreover, from the way the man opened the door, Alan suspected it might be a prison cell.

“Come on, get in there!” The two crew members following behind them practically shoved Alan and the other two into the room.

“W-what the hell is going on here?!”

As Alan frantically pounded on the door, the area in front of him turned transparent, revealing the pirates on the other side grinning at them.

“Explain yourselves! We’re guests, aren’t we!?”

“Don’t get so worked up. You’re here because you’re guests.”

“There are different ranks of guests, you know. Besides, this is a fine guest room.”

“Stop it, stop it! I’m not becoming Komachi’s subordinate! Listen, I used to be part of Kamidake’s crew! I’ve got tons of vital intel that you guys would kill for!”

“Are you saying you’re going to switch sides?” The man said, feigning a slight panic.

“Heh heh. If you don’t like that, then treat me with a little more respect.”

“I’m surprised. To just throw away a stroke of luck like that.”

“L-luck? What do you mean by that?” Barry, who had been on the edge of his seat watching Alan’s exchange, stepped forward as if to push Alan aside when he heard the man’s words.

“You guys… do you know what kind of place that is, and still talk like that?”

“W-what kind of place…?”

“If you’re part of the Kamidake crew, this is enemy territory for you. And since you’re connected to Yamada Seina, there are plenty of pirates who hold a grudge against you. No matter how valuable your information might be , it doesn’t mean much to most of them. Don’t think you’ll die easily if you get caught.”

“N-no way…”

Not just Barry, but the other two’s faces turned pale in an instant. Alan quickly ducked behind Cohen, using him as a shield.

“Under these circumstances, there are very few people who can guarantee your safety.”

“Are you saying that person is… Komachi-sama?”

“But the fact that we're hated that much means, conversely, that our abilities are that high, right?” Alan said with a smug look as he peeked out from behind Cohen.

“You’re underestimating our intelligence network. We’ve already got all your information.”

“Huh!?”

“Your work attitude and performance with the GP. You embezzled Ryoko Balta Fan Club dues, fled, got caught, and were assigned to the Kamidake crew, which had no other candidates, in exchange for the GP covering your expenses. Then, after that big incident, you were demoted to trainees and deserted. Well, I don’t know exactly what you did during the incident to get demoted, but you’re definitely on the wanted list.”

“I-it wasn’t our fault we got demoted! We were just tricked and used by Seina’s NB in the first place!”

“Looking at you guys, I can pretty much guess what you did over there. The Captain would’ve seen right through you in a heartbeat. Well, she’s definitely not the type to take people like you as subordinates.”

“Then why are we here? If you don’t plan to hand us over to other pirates, why?”

“Judging by how quickly she chose to isolate you, she probably wants to prevent you from talking about it anywhere else. In any case, don't even think about trying any strange tactics. If you incur the boss's displeasure, she might consider sending you back to the GP, as the bounty is surprisingly high due to the large debts involved.”

“W-well then! I’ll work to pay double that bounty! So…”

“You guys were made to buy membership cards from the courier, weren’t you?”

“Huh? …Y-yes. They said it serves as our ID here.”

“...Oh, they took all the money I had.” Cohen said pitifully.

“That’s probably why you were working there. I don’t know how much money you had, but it was definitely worth several times that amount here. Either way, since the Galactic Federation doesn’t recognize our currency, you’ll have to pay several times the amount to exchange it on the black market.”

“You mean the exchange rate is different!?”

“In other words, paying double your bounty means your debt will end up being about 50% more than what you originally owed.”

“Fifty percent more!?”

“Ah, Alan! You~~~!!”

“You guys agreed to the escape too!”

Inside the cell, Alan and the others started a messy argument. The pirates watched with wry smiles, but then, BANG!, someone slammed their fist against the wall to stop their bickering.

“Whether you’re sent back or we find another use for you is ultimately up to the boss. Anyway,

just stay put here for a while."

With that, the pirates got into the elevator and left. The cylindrical elevator unit was completely retracted to the upper floor, making it impossible to control from this floor and leaving them completely isolated.

"After all this hardship, our debt has only increased..."

"And what's more, we're surrounded by enemies."

Barry and Cohen glared at Alan with resentment. But the moment the pirates were gone, Alan sat back arrogantly.

"Now, calm down. Paying double the bounty was just a joke. Didn't they say the same thing? That if we incurred the boss's displeasure?"

"Y-yeah, you're right."

"Even if the worst happens, if we add a little extra to the reward money, we won't be deported. In that case, our debt will be reduced by nearly 30%."

"I see… When you put it that way, that's actually quite a reduction."

"Besides, the GP is used to dealing with pirates. The bounties paid within the Federation might be different from the ones paid to pirates."

"The difference in exchange rates!"

"Exactly! They know full well that it's ridiculous to pay out the bounty when they could convert it into points we can use here. If that happens, our debt will go down even more! And even if we're surrounded by enemies, the one who's really hated is Yamada Seina. We got demoted because we defied him."

"That's certainly one way to look at it, but..."

"The fact that we tried to escape is ultimately Yamada Seina's fault, too. Just like the pirates, we're victims of Yamada Seina."

"...I see." As usual, Barry and Cohen were swayed by Alan's self-serving logic and nodded in agreement.

Then Alan pressed on with his argument. "If we play that card, we can win their sympathy. And even if we end up working for free for a little while, it's still way better than it was back there, right? Well, if we show them what we're really capable of, there's no doubt we'll get promoted in no time."

"I see. If that happens, our salary will go up too…"

"We'll be hitting on hot chicks and living the high life. Wahahahahahahaha!"

In the blink of an eye, Alan and his team were back to their usual selves, bursting into loud laughter inside the prison cell.

While Alan was cackling like an idiot inside the cell, just as Komachi had feared, information about Alan and his crew was being brought to Tarrant by pirates trying to curry favor with him.

“I see. So, what about the guys who were sharing that information?”

“I hear Komachi took them away, but I can have them brought here through the executive committee. What would you like to do?”

A new aide, he didn’t know how many there had been since the Seto incident, asked timidly.

“If Komachi is isolating them, that’s convenient. More importantly, to prevent the information from spreading, dispose of those loose-lipped bastards.”

“Yes, sir! Immediately.” The aide fled Tarrant’s room as if escaping.

“Yamada Seina…”

Tarrant glared with hatred at the knife, the very one Seina had used to wound him, now stuck in the luxurious screen, his face contorted with malice. Pierced through the tip of the knife were photos of Seina, the object of his hatred, and Kirche.

“Damn it!!”

With a gasp, Tarrant desperately restrained himself from reaching for the knife. If he were to grab it, he feared he would slash indiscriminately until the blade snapped. But he had decided that the only person he would use that knife on was Yamada Seina himself.

Yet Tarrant’s rage showed no signs of subsiding. The target of his frustration had already fled, and his anger would not be appeased by a single aide. In that moment, the only thing capable of redirecting Tarrant’s fury was the figure of Kiriko, the female of his own kind who had once stood before him as a beast even fiercer than himself.

“Hah! Hah-hah-hah!”

Even now, the image of Kiriko, covered in blood, was vividly etched in Tarrant's mind, and as he recalled it, his anger transformed into intense excitement and ecstasy. And when he imagined pinning that female down, embracing her, and ravaging her to his heart's content, Tarrant felt the ultimate pleasure.

About thirty minutes passed, and Tarrant, dripping with sweat and breathing heavily, slumped exhausted against the sofa. To steady his ragged breathing, he took a deep breath to calm himself, then slowly opened a secure communication channel.

“It’s me… Upgrade the information on that ship to S-rank. There’s a possibility that Yamada

Seina is involved. Also, is that thing finished? …… Good! Have them get it ready immediately."

After hearing the report, Tarrant cut the communication and gazed at the desolate desert planet visible through the dome-shaped ceiling. That was the location of the satellite from which Miki had previously helped the scientists escape.

"Heh heh heh… It's almost time. Almost time!"

Komachi finished chatting with her subordinates and returned alone to her private quarters on her ship. The others had moved on to the second and third rounds of drinking and wouldn't be back until dawn. However, Komachi had something on her mind, something she couldn't discuss in front of her subordinates.

She opened the data she had received from the middle-aged executive and stared at it intently. It was something she might never have noticed had the middle-aged executive not asked her about the appearances of the man, Kagato, and Akara Naja.

"...They do look alike."

Displayed side by side were images of Hakubi Washu as an adult and Kamiki Seto, known as "The Demon Princess of Jurai." But what was confusing Komachi even more was…

"But... What?? More importantly... More importantly!??"

What Komachi was intently watching was a video of Akara Naja goofing around next to Washu.

With that, Komachi accessed the database the elderly executive had told her about and brought up brief profiles of Hakubi Washu, Akara Naja, and Kamiki Seto.

"The word common to all three is…"

The search results appeared in an instant. Although there were quite a few entries listed, only one caught Komachi's eye, the name of a planet that no longer existed.

"...Akara Naja died in the explosion of that planet while it was being surveyed. On the same day, Kamiki Seto was rescued there as the orphan of a treasure hunter. And fifteen thousand years before that, Hakubi Washu was taken in on a nearby planet..."

That fact further confirmed Komachi's outlandish idea. It was the kind of story that would be laughed at as a coincidence if told to others, but it was a hunch only Komachi, who had spoken to Kamiki Seto up close many times, even if only through video, could have. However, that idea confused Komachi and simultaneously instilled in her a profound sense of fear.

Desperate for any shred of hope, Komachi searched for others who shared her theory. However, while stories about the male and female Kagatos, as told by the middle-aged executive, could be found here and there, no matter where she looked, she couldn't find even a fragment of evidence to support her own theory.

"...Gah!!"

Komachi felt an even greater sense of dread, and cold sweat trickled down her forehead. The search results implied one of two things: either no one had noticed this by chance, or there was someone out there suppressing the truth.

"Hey , are you there?"

Clatter! Komachi fell off her chair in shock. Cold sweat poured from her entire body, and her heart pounded so hard it felt like it would burst.

It was the voice of the one person she least wanted to see right then.

"W-what!? Why!?"

Even though it was just audio, she wondered why the hotline to Seto was working.

"What's wrong? You sound really flustered… You're the one who opened the communication, right?"

"I did!?"

"And you didn't even realize that… You must have been pretty absorbed in something, huh? Like, for example… were you looking into something that seemed really interesting?"

Those words sealed Komachi's resolve.

(If I do this now, at worst, only my own life will be lost.)

Komachi finally stood up on trembling legs, wiped the sweat from her face, and opened the hotline completely.

Seto appeared on the screen, grinning broadly,

"You have something you want to ask, don't you?" She asked in her usual calm tone, without any hint of intimidation.

"……Yeah. I heard an interesting story from some guys who claim to be former Kamidake crew members who defected from the GP. Apparently, it's related to that ship that's been the subject of rumors around here lately."

"What about those former Kamidake crew members?"

"We're holding them here. If you like, I can hand them over to you. Of course, it would have to be in exchange for someone of equal standing."

"In that case, please hold onto them for about a week. After that, you can do whatever you

like with them."

A week was just enough time for the classified information Alan and the others possessed to become completely meaningless.

"You're right. It might be best not to let that boy get any more involved with them."

"Hehe. Have you calmed down a bit? Now then, anything else you want to ask. I'll answer anything. For the record, what you were investigating just now is mostly correct."

"What!?" Faced with such a blunt affirmation, even Komachi couldn't help but break down in surprise.

It was as if she'd been handed a death sentence right at the start of a trial.

"……Hmph! So you're going to tell me everything at the very end, are you?"

"At the very end? Oh my, do I really seem that cold-blooded?"

"After all, you are Her Highness, 'The Demon Princess of Jurai.'"

"I have no intention of hiding what you've been investigating, nor do I mind if you know. I understand perfectly why you're confused. After all, I was the very one who first arrived at that question myself."

"Question? What do you mean?"

"I had sealed away my memories. They've recently been unlocked… and until then, I was quite troubled. 'Why? Why?'… you know?"

"Sealed them?"

"That's a private matter, so no comment. Of course, quite a few others have noticed it too… but just like you, they probably think they'll be erased if they speak up. It really is a terrible situation." Seto puffed out her cheeks and looked displeased.

"So Hakubi Washu is still alive, then."

"She's busily creating urban legends at the Academy. Also, Ryo-Ohki and that ship were both built by Washu-chan, but don't worry, she can't mass-produce them. Oh, and by the way, Ryoko-chan is alive too… Wait, what's wrong?" Seto looked puzzled as Komachi slumped into her chair.

"To have the legend spoiled so casually… It's more than just a letdown, it's downright terrifying. What exactly is the price for this story? I suppose there's no cooling-off period, right?"

"I want you to reaffirm your position. With Seina-dono's arrival, the history of the galaxy is shifting more dramatically than ever before. Don't misjudge the situation, and don't neglect your preparations."

“Mind your own business. I’ll just do what I can from my own position.”

“Very well. My position is different from what it used to be, too. We both have things we must protect.”

Seto stared intently at the images of Hakubi Washu and Akara Naja visible behind Komachi.

“Still, why did the legendary Philosopher build a ship identical to the Ryo-Ohki for that boy? What does she intend to make that boy do?” Perhaps out of sympathy for Seina, a hint of reproach crept into Komachi’s tone.

“Because I don’t want him to die.”

“Huh?”

“Both Washu-chan and I like Seina-dono. Well, the main reason is that there’s someone we’d both be afraid of if we treated Seina-dono carelessly.”

“So you guys have someone you’re afraid of? That’s just as shocking as a spoiler for a legend.”

“Hehe, well then, see you later. Good night.” With that, Seto ended the call.

Komachi, relieved of the tension, staggered to her feet and began walking toward her bedroom. Once inside, finding even the slightest restriction of clothing bothersome, she stripped off all her clothes and collapsed onto the bed completely naked. However, due to the extreme tension, she remained wide awake.

“The history of the galaxy is about to take a major turn… I suppose. It’s true that ever since that boy arrived, the damage on our side has been escalating rapidly.”

Pirates, by their very nature, existed in scattered groups. Unlike those who formed nations, they never gathered in one place. Trying to root them out or wipe them out was like trying to recover jewels the size of grains of sand scattered across a vast desert. No matter how much military strength and manpower was poured into it, eradication was impossible. Therefore, all the GP could do was protect cargo from attacking pirates, apprehend the unlucky pirates who fell for their decoys, and pinpoint and annihilate only the most vicious pirates.

“...But that boy is different.”

Seina was capable of gathering the jewels scattered across the desert into a single spot. For now, his range of action was limited, so the damage has been contained to a small area, but if he managed to expand that range in the future, there was no telling how much damage he could cause.

“I see… So you don’t want him to die, huh?”

Expanding his range of action would attract many pirates, and if the guild were to seriously set out to eliminate Yamada Seina, the consequences would be far worse than the recent incident involving Tarrant.

“No… on the contrary, the fact that that kid possesses a ship rivaling an Imperial Ship means…” Komachi shuddered and cringed.

Then, realizing another possibility, she sat up abruptly.

“I see! An encounter with The Big Daruma!? Is that the possibility they’re aiming for?!”

Given that a similar encounter occurred in the past, the likelihood was high. The energy-to-mass ratio measured during the recent encounter with the Ryo-Ohki had exceeded the measurement limit. That meant it was on par with an Imperial Ship.

(Imperial Ships have those troublesome Light Hawk Wings, but Ryo-Ohki doesn’t. It probably has powerful shields, but with the Big Daruma’s full firepower, it should be possible to break through them…)

Komachi began to imagine a battle between the two, using Ryo-Ohki as a hypothetical opponent for The Big Daruma. It would be difficult to concentrate firepower on Ryo-Ohki, which was a small ship by comparison. While that might be manageable in a fleet battle, the sheer size of a planet-scale vessel worked against them; at least half of their mounted weapons would be obscured, making them unusable against Ryo-Ohki. Furthermore, if it was on par with an Imperial Ship, there was a high probability it possessed teleportation capabilities. It was nearly impossible to concentrate firepower on a small ship capable of unpredictable, superluminal movement.

(If I let it get close, it’s all over. The ships on board won’t be enough to stop it… If it dances its Genocide Dance in close range, even the Big Daruma will be blown to smithereens…)

Position at the time of encounter, early detection, and a swift response. The outcome was decided almost entirely by whether the first strike succeeded or failed. Ultimately, it would be a battle decided by luck.

“Consider your position… huh?”

If they wanted to protect the guild, assassinating Yamada Seina was the surest way. But of course, the enemy would be wary of that, and there was a high chance they'd fall into a trap. And attempting to eliminate Yamada Seina would mean reversing the roles of offense and defense. The pirates who had been fighting against the Galactic Federation by scattering their presence would now have to launch an attack against the Academy, Jurai, and Seniwa. Moreover, the enemy knew their target.

Elusive and mysterious, The Big Daruma, whose very form was unknown even to the GP, was the symbol of the Da Ruma Guild and had become something of a legend. If the Big Daruma was defeated, it would mean losing the center of their cohesion.

“...We may already be checkmated. If we are thinking about protecting those who seek refuge in the guild, it would certainly be better to use the escape route prepared by The Demon Princess.”

—-Don’t misjudge the situation, and don’t neglect your preparations.

“I see… In any case, it certainly seems we’re running out of time.”

Having found a path forward within herself, Komachi, overcome by exhaustion and drowsiness, collapsed onto the bed like a puppet whose strings had been cut and fell into a deep sleep.

Chapter Nine: Fuku · Special Training

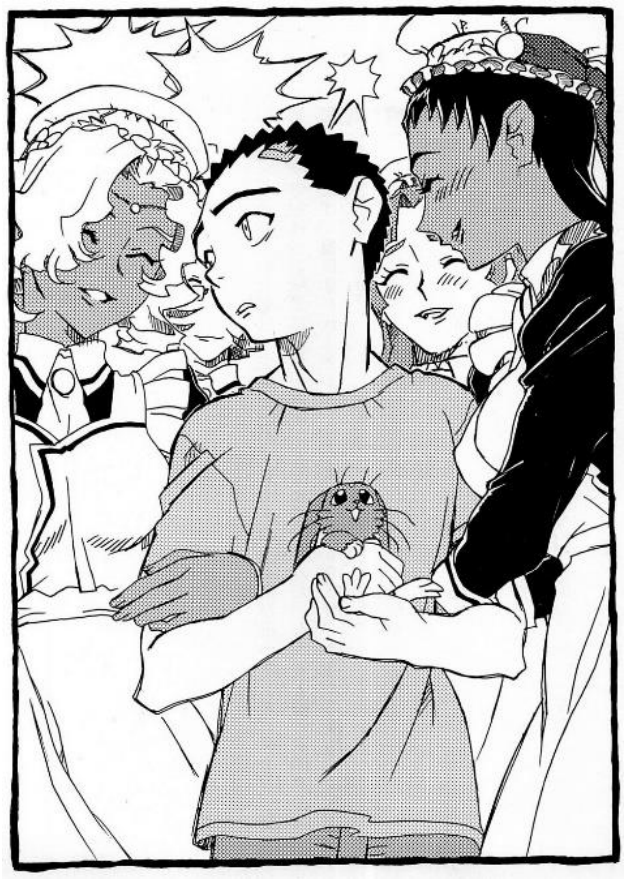
That morning, Seina woke up as usual, picked up Fuku, and stepped out of the room.

“Whoa! What’s going on?!”

Just as he stepped into the hallway, he sensed someone behind him and heard NB’s scream at the same time. Seina spun around instinctively, but the door slammed shut right before his eyes, and everything fell silent.

“Huh!? What’s going on??”

“Good morning, Seina-sama, Fuku-chan. Now then, it’s noisy here, so let’s head over to the dining room.”



Hakuren and the others said with a smile, either picking up Fuku or taking Seina by the hand as they started walking toward the dining room.

“Uh, um… Just now, behind us, NB…”

“Ah, that’s Kiriko-san and the others, who were hiding by the outer wall using special equipment to capture NB.”

“Whaa!?” Seina was speechless at Gyokuren’s casual mention of something so outrageous.

Karen leaned in with a wry smile and said, “I know that must have surprised you, but we determined that NB would be a hindrance to today’s mission. Kiriko-sama will explain the details on Kamidake, so please go about your morning preparations as usual.” She whispered and smiled gently.

“O-okay.”

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“Have a safe trip.”

Seina and the crew were seen off by Hakuren and her group as usual, and headed toward the entrance at the bottom of Amane’s apartment building.

“Good morning.” The staff member stationed at the entrance bowed to Seina and the others, then opened the heavily armored door next to the reception desk.

“Have a safe trip.”

As Seina and the others stepped through the door, a ten-meter-long corridor lay before them, with a large teleportation gate visible at the end.

That heavily guarded teleportation gate was used by residents when traveling ultra-long distances or to special locations. Seina and his companions didn’t know this, but since nearly all the apartment residents were their bodyguards, the gate was reserved exclusively for them.

“Fuku, if you would.”

“Myaa.”

Fuku, who was being held by Seina, leaped onto the biometric authentication plate. Immediately, the gate began to respond. Fuku served as the biometric key for teleportation to Kamidake. Of course, if Fuku and the main ship were fully operational, Fuku herself could function as the teleportation gate, but for now, they had no choice but to use the gate as a backup.

Teleported onto the bridge of Kamidake, Seina and the girls headed for their stations.

“...It feels pretty weird without that annoying guy around.” After placing Fuku on the table, Seina took his seat and looked toward where NB usually sat.

“Captain, I apologize for the commotion this morning.”

“No, that’s fine, but…”

“I had intended to consult with you beforehand, but given Fuku-chan’s unstable mental state , I decided it would be better not to discuss work at home.”

“So that’s how it was… I’m sorry. If only I’d handled it a little better…”

“Captain. That kind of mindset comes across to Fuku-chan.”

At Kiriko’s words, Seina noticed Fuku looking at him anxiously.

“It’s okay, Fuku.” Seina said to Fuku, forcing a cheerful expression.

“Actually, we’re planning to build a full-scale sub-control system for Kamidake. I want to re-collect data on the basic control transmission system, but I didn’t want to put any unnecessary stress on Fuku-chan while doing so.”

“Is that why you left NB?”

“Yes. Since control accuracy is influenced by emotions, if we were to argue during data collection, there’s a risk the data wouldn’t be accurate.”

“I suppose that’s understandable… but in that case, you could have just explained it normally…” Recalling the commotion at home, Seina was a little taken aback by this somewhat unusual response.

“W-well…” Unable to explain the inner workings of the NB, Kiriko hesitated slightly. “That guy has an unusually strong competitive streak with Fuku, doesn’t he? If I’d told him I was leaving him behind, I didn’t know if he’d have listened to me.”

“Even so, it felt pretty intense, didn’t it?”

“That NB is unnecessarily high-performance… If we hadn’t done that, he would have sensed it in advance, and above all, he blocked every single field we had prepared.”

“He even broke through the high-density molecular shield.”

“Exactly! We managed to pull it off by freezing time, but it looks like it’s equipped with an acceleration device, so the question is how long it’ll last.”

“Once we got here, it was practically a win.”

“...Really?”

He suspected Kiriko and the others were hiding something from him, but as far as NB was concerned, there was no doubt it would affect Fuku.

“Well then, I’ll count on you today too, Fuku.” Deciding that further conversation was a waste of time, Seina composed himself and looked over at Fuku.

“Myaa!” Perhaps the change of scenery at home was working, because Fuku meowed cheerfully from the center of the table.

Relieved to see this, Seina looked back at Kiriko.

“Launch preparations complete. We’re ready to go.”

“Roger. Then, Kamidake, launch!”

At Seina’s command, Kamidake, now equipped with its deployed camouflage unit, rose from the deep waters of the Academy’s home planet to the surface. It was the night sea, nearly on the opposite side of the planet from Amane’s apartment.

“Captain, I’d like to retrieve some experimental equipment along the way.”

“Understood. Please proceed.”

“Roger. Transmitting ID beacon.”

No sooner had she transmitted the message than a reply came back within a second.

“Target confirmed ahead! Please proceed with recovery.”

About one kilometer ahead of the Kamidake, a small container was floating on the sea. After retrieving it , the Kamidake began to ascend silently and rapidly.

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“Myaa?” Fuku meowed anxiously as she looked up at Kiriko, who was fitting a helmet-like sensor onto her head.

“Fuku-chan, just stay still for a moment... there, OK. All set. How about you?”

“Signal detection, sensitivity is good. I was a little worried since it was a rush job, but it’s picking up deeper psychological signals than I expected.” Elma, who had secured the relay unit in the center of the table, looked at Kiriko and replied.

“Myau.”

“You mustn’t take that off!”

Gently holding down Fuku’s front paw as she scratched at her helmet, she placed her right on top of the relay unit.

“I’m sorry. With a regular scan sensor, Fuku-chan would get defensive, so please keep that on while you’re working for a while. In exchange, there won’t be any battles with pirates.”

“Myau?”

“It's not scary, so don't worry.” Kiriko smiled as she stroked Fuku’s chin with her index finger while she looked on in bewilderment.

“Captain, we’re about to conduct a mock battle that includes ship handling tests. We’ll be using the experimental planetary dome located within the Academy.”

“Aren’t we doing this in outer space?”

“It wouldn’t make sense if we ran into pirates on the way there,” Kiriko said with a wry smile.

“I see... That makes sense.”

“The interior is a high-compression space, simulating a solar system-class environment. We could only secure it for about twelve consecutive hours, but since it also functions as an accelerated space, the internal time equivalent is 120 hours, effectively five days of operation.”

“That should be enough data collection. It will be a somewhat demanding schedule, but we're planning to give Fuku-chan plenty of rest.”

“Got it. Well then, Fuku, let’s do our best.”

“Myaa!”

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“Kiriko-san, I’ve completed the transmission of the plan to Central Control. It will be ready to run in five minutes.”

“Copy that! All systems go. No abnormalities on the instruments.”

Kiriko looked at Seina and waited for the signal. With the start imminent, Seina smiled to reassure Fuku, who looked a little anxious. Fuku then began to wag her tail, and that served as the cue to begin.

“Please begin the experiment when the time comes.”

“Roger.”

Numerous navigation markers began appearing in the simulated space within the experimental environment. Starting with simple orbits, they gradually became more complex, and at times, the speed settings between markers also changed.

“Passing through Route 3513! Time schedule deviation within expectations. Energy generator output remains stable.”

“Roger.”

Data streamed across the monitors in front of Kiriko and Elma at an incredible rate. While most of it was processed automatically, there was also a significant amount of data that required human judgment. The two of them instantly analyzed and processed a volume of data that would be impossible for an ordinary human to handle.

With a few breaks in between, the program lasted eight hours.

“Control system nerve construction value: 20. Exceeds the minimum required value.”

“Looking good. Fuku-chan is stable too, let's extend it to 30.”

Kiriko and Elma exchanged relieved glances.

“Amane, head to 354.”

“Roger!”

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“The construction value of the control system has exceeded 30.”

“Roger. Terminating the program.”

At Kiriko’s words, the tension on the bridge eased. After processing the data collected, Kiriko headed toward the rear of the ship and removed the equipment she had set up.

“Myan!” Relieved, Fuku stretched widely, shaking her body in short, jerky movements like an animal flinging water from its wet fur.

“Good work today. Fuku-chan's work for today is finished.” Kiriko picked up Fuku and walked over to Seina.

“Myan!” Fuku happily jumped from Kiriko’s arms onto Seina’s lap.

“Good job, Fuku.”

“Myaaaan~~~♡” Fuku meowed happily and rubbed her body against him as Seina stroked her.

“Captain. We’ll be conducting a verification test in an hour, so please take Fuku-chan…”

“Understood.” Seina picked up Fuku and headed toward the teleportation gate.

“Shall we have a light meal here as well? Amane, please take care of it.” After seeing Seina off, Kiriko turned to Amane.

“Got it. The usual will do, right?”

“Yes, please.”

Organizing the data was Kiriko and Elma’s responsibility. That meant Amane had the most free time. Though when she said “meal,” she simply meant bringing over food prepared by the automated system.

Seina and Fuku walked through the circular park toward the house where they’d spent time with Neeju. Seina did have his own private residence, but since it didn’t have proper interior finishes yet and was so vast it made him uneasy, they decided to stay somewhere he was at least somewhat familiar with.

“Is it tasty, Fuku?”

“Myaaan!”

While eating with Fuku, Seina interacted with her cheerfully, just as Hakuren and the others did at home, to help her switch her mind off from work even a little. After finishing their meal, he took a bath with Fuku. Here, too, they played around at first, then gradually settled into soaking in the warm water to lull Fuku to sleep.

“Fumyaa~~”

Just as Seina had hoped, Fuku began to doze off in the bathtub.

“Okay, let’s get out.”

Seina gently picked Fuku up, dried both of them off with a bath towel, wrapped Fuku in a

fresh towel, and headed toward the bedroom. There, he found eight unfamiliar pieces of equipment arranged on the floor and ceiling, encircling the room.

“Fuku, I'll be gone for about three hours, but please wait here alone.”

Gently stroking Fuku, who was half-asleep, Seina’s expression clouded slightly. That was because what he was about to do was essentially locking Fuku in the room.

The equipment installed in the room was a shield generator designed to completely isolate Fuku from the ship; for the verification experiment they were about to conduct, it was necessary to block Fuku’s influence. Of course, it would have been simple to freeze time for Fuku, but Seina decided against it, judging that it wouldn’t be good if Fuku became anxious and started crying the moment he was even slightly out of sight.

“Well then, I’ll be going now.”

After confirming that Fuku had fallen asleep, Seina quietly activated the machine and left the room.

“Mii…”

At first, Fuku thought Seina was just setting up his secret wall to study as usual, but when she heard Seina’s faint footsteps stop in the living room and realized he was changing clothes, she began to feel something was off.

“Myaa?”

And when those footsteps headed toward the front door, that sense of unease turned into anxiety. Then, upon hearing the sound of the front door opening and closing, Fuku leapt out of her small bed.

“Mya, myaaaa! Migya!”

But Fuku was blocked by the shield and bounced back. Even so, she kept ramming into the shield, but it didn’t budge an inch. Scratching at it with her claws or trying to bite it was all in vain.

“Myaa! Myaa!?”

Then Fuku realized she couldn’t even access her own body.

“Fumya...fumyaaan”

In the dimly lit room, Fuku wandered around anxiously and uneasy. Seeking even a shred of comfort, she darted back to the bed, curled up, and began to tremble.

“Myau…”

Fuku closed her eyes tightly out of anxiety and fear, and suddenly noticed a faint scent of Seina. It was coming from the towel that had been wrapped around her just a moment ago.

“Mya!”

Desperate to cling to anything, Fuku burrowed into the towel and sniffed Seina’s scent with all her might. The warmth and softness enveloping her body, combined with Seina’s scent, helped Fuku regain a little composure. She pulled the towel closer, pressing herself even tighter against it.

“Fumya… Mya…”

With a soft sucking sound, Fuku began to suck on the towel as if drinking milk, and before long, she drifted off into a light sleep.

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“Sorry I’m late.”

Seina entered the bridge breathless. The planned one-hour session was about thirty minutes over schedule.

“I just finished organizing the data. By the way, where’s Fuku-chan?”

“Yes, she fell asleep just fine.”

“Kiriko-san, I’ve accessed the ship’s surveillance system. Here’s the feed from Fuku-chan’s bedroom.” Elma projected footage of Fuku’s bedroom onto the large screen. There, wrapped in a towel, was Fuku.

“...She seems to be okay.”

Although her face wasn’t fully visible, the steady rise and fall of her chest indicated that Fuku was asleep. However, there was no way to tell from that footage what inner turmoil she had been going through just moments before.

“That’s a relief. Now, let’s proceed with the verification tests.”

Everyone present smiled in relief, then sat back down in their chairs and their expressions became serious.

The next morning, when Fuku woke up, she noticed Seina snoring beside her.

“Mya…”

Overcome with joy, Fuku reflexively tried to pounce, but realizing she mustn’t wake him, she desperately held back the urge. Just how strong that urge was was evident from her tail, which was wagging so hard it seemed it might snap.

About twenty minutes later, Seina’s breathing suddenly became irregular.

“U, uuuuuh…”

He stretched widely and slowly opened his eyes. At that moment, unable to hold back any longer, Fuku sprang toward Seina as if she were being propelled forward.

“Myaa! Myaa! Myaa! Myaa! Myaa! Myaa! Myaa!!!” Fuku clung tightly to Seina’s face and began to cry.

“Whoa, whoa! Fuku? Wait, that hurts! Don’t scratch me!”

Accustomed to sudden mishaps, Seina didn’t try to frantically pry her off; instead, he gently hugged her tightly with both arms to calm her down. Perhaps because her body was held still, Fuku’s tension eased, and her claws retracted.

“Myaa... Myaa, myaa, myaa.”

Fuku's voice gradually became weaker and more affectionate, and she repeatedly rubbed her cheek against his as if to show her deepest affection. Then, Seina felt the dampness on Fuku's fur and her own skin, and slowly pulled Fuku away.

“...Fuku, you...”

“Myaa, myaa, myaa...” Tears were streaming down Fuku’s face.

“I see… you were lonely, weren’t you…? I’m sorry for leaving you alone. But in order to verify the data we collected, I have to isolate you from the ship, and I need to learn the basics myself just in case something happens.” Seina explained gently, as he wiped Fuku’s tears away with the sleeve of his nightgown.

“……Mii.” Fuku nodded slightly at Seina’s explanation.

Though it wasn’t clear if she fully understood the details, she realized that what had happened last night was necessary for Seina.

“You were sleeping so soundly last night that I didn’t wake you, but I’ll wake you up when I get back.”

Seina thought it would be better to put Fuku to sleep feeling truly at ease rather than letting her sleep while still anxious.

“Myaa.”

“Good girl, good girl.”

Seina hugged Fuku, who was happily wagging her tail, close to his chest, then stood up and started toward the living room. Just then, Fuku suddenly tried to wriggle out of Seina’s arms.

“Huh? What’s wrong?”

When Seina set Fuku down on the floor, Fuku dashed over to her bed, grabbed the towel, and brought it back to Seina. Then she rolled over and lay down, wrapping himself in the towel.

“Is something wrong with the towel? …Wait, could it be…?”

Seina recognized that behavior. It was just like when his younger sister, Yoshiko, used to carry around a small, stuffed-animal-like scarf with her everywhere when she was little. Yoshiko seemed to love the stuffed animal’s fur, and she kept it even after it had worn down to just a small patch of fur.

“Do you like this towel?”

“Myaa.”

“I see… Well then, shall we take it with us?”

Seina scooped up Fuku along with the towel and headed toward the living room. Just as they entered the living room, the front door opened, and Kiriko and the others came in.

“Good morning, Seina-chan, Fuku-chan. How are you feeling?” Kiriko approached Seina, checked his complexion, and then gently stroked Fuku’s head.

“Myaaaa~~~u.” Fuku let out a soft ticklish little meow as Kiriko’s slender, cool hand touched her.

Then, when she stroked her chin, she closed her eyes in apparent comfort.

“Oh, what’s this towel?”

“She seems to like it. I think it’s something like that fur thing Yoshiko used to have.”

“Oh, I see. Come to think of it, Kai was the same way.” Kiriko smiled nostalgically.

“It seems she really was quite lonely last night, all by herself.”

“I see… but she’ll have to get used to it little by little.”

“Mii.”

“...Hehe, you’re such a good girl. I’ll make breakfast for you right away, then.” Kiriko let go of Fuku’s hand and headed for the kitchen.

As if they’d been waiting for that moment, Elma and Amane took turns greeting Fuku.

“Myaa! Myau♡” As if her crying moments ago had been a lie, Fuku was now in high spirits.

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“Today we'll be focusing on shooting-related data collection.”

Just like yesterday, Kiriko attached the measuring devices to Fuku while talking to her to help ease her tension as she worked.

“Kiriko-san. There’s noise coming through again.” Elma looked at Fuku’s towel with a slightly

sympathetic expression.

“Got it.”

As Kiriko approached Fuku, she ripped off the towel she was wrapped in.

“Mya~~~n… Mya!?”

Kiriko quickly caught Fuku as she spun around and fell, placing her on top of the relay device. Perhaps finding it amusing, Fuku giggled.

However, “Okay, Fuku-chan, let’s put this over here, shall we?”

When Kiriko placed the towel next to the relay box, Fuku, naturally wanting the towel, tried to jump down from the relay box.

“Fuku-chan! You have to be patient while I’m working.”

“Meow?”

At Kiriko’s slightly sharp tone, Fuku froze in place. She looked up at Kiriko slowly with pleading eyes, but Kiriko ignored her and turned to look at Elma.

“OK. The noise is within acceptable limits.”

“……Fuku-chan. Let’s leave the towel here, okay?” Kiriko looked at Fuku with a gentle yet unyielding expression after hearing Elma’s report.

“Mya… meow.” Fuku looked away from Kiriko and gazed at the towel with a worried expression.

“Fuku, it's okay.”

“Mya?”

It was meant to fill the void left by Seina’s absence. Fuku lifted her head and stared intently at Seina.

“It’s okay. I’m right here.”

“Myaa.”

Reassured by Seina’s gentle voice and the comfort of his presence, Fuku moved to her usual spot on the relay unit.

“Good girl. Now, I’ll start the program.”

Kiriko gave the equipment attached to Fuku a quick check, then hurried back to her seat.

“Program start!”

Along with Elma’s voice, a single target ball, about ten meters in diameter and constructed from a force field, appeared in the experimental space.

“Fuku-chan, attack the target.”

“Mya!!”

Fuku reflexively aimed at the target. Just then, a low-power laser was fired from Kamidake, and the target ball vanished.

“Hit. Moving on to the second stage.”

The same target reappeared, and this time it attacked with a low-power laser.

“Meow!!” Fuku tensed up instinctively.

“Reaction values have dropped below the threshold! Noise in the neural structure!” Elma quickly cut that section out.

“Kiriko-san, please try directing the attack at the decoy target once.”

“Roger.”

Realizing Seina’s intention, Kiriko fired her laser at the target set up for practice. Seeing that it wasn’t dangerous, Fuku looked at Seina and wagged her tail.

“Fuku, it's just like the game you play at home.”

He was referring to the shooting game they’d been playing at Amane’s house as a form of training. It wasn’t something that produced immediate results, but Hakuren and the others had suggested it in the hope that Fuku would at least get used to that kind of situation. In fact, even Fuku, who was scared at first, quickly grew to love the game once she realized there was no real danger.

“Fuku-chan’s vital signs have stabilized. Resuming the experiment.”

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“Kiriko-san, what do you think of these fire control system configuration values…?”

“Well… numerically, I don’t think there’s a problem, but the pattern shapes are a bit monotonous.”

The monitor displayed a neural pattern resembling tree roots. Compared to the navigation system data collected yesterday, displayed next to it, it seemed slightly lacking in branching.

“Ha ha, the little one's cutting corners here. I bet she's reading the target's decision-making routines.”

“Huh... You're kidding!?”

Even for a military computer, deriving patterns from high-level data, even if it was for training purposes, was an extremely difficult task. And this wasn't something simple enough to be analyzed after just a few days of training.

"If she could do this well all the time, I wouldn't have to work so hard. Kiriko, set it up so I can control their target control system from here."

"Huh? Oh, I see. Got it."

That meant a showdown between Amane and Fuku.

"Alright! Let's resume the experiment. Here we go, little one."

"Meow??"

The moment the target began to move, Fuku's fur bristled in alertness. Kamidake was thrown off balance by the tricky movements and precise shots, which were incomparable to what had happened earlier. However, perhaps because of that, the measurement values skyrocketed, and the pattern's shape rapidly became increasingly complex.

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"Fu, fumya~~~n..." Fuku collapsed on the spot, exhausted.

"Oh my, little one. Already down?"

"Program complete! I'm at my limit. You are too."

"Got it... Phew." Though her expression remained calm, Amane's face was drenched in sweat.

"To collect this much data on just the second day is beyond my expectations! We've already cleared over 80% of the projected plan for the first four days."

"If Fuku could perform this well in a real situation, she'd be able to handle most scenarios. Like, for example, that time with Seto-sama's package."

"Kiriko-san, it's a bit early, but let's call it a day for today…"

"Right, Elma. Well then, Captain, Fuku-chan is pretty exhausted, and since we'll start the verification at the usual time, please take it easy for a bit."

"Understood. Alright, Fuku, let's head back."

Seina wrapped Fuku, who was slumped over, in her favorite towel, cradling her as he lifted her up. He bowed to Kiriko and the girls, then headed toward the teleportation gate.

After confirming that Seina had been teleported away with a low humming sound, Kiriko and the others let out a small sigh.

"I suppose this is about the limit for the little one right now."

“I suppose so. Judging by her teleportation and high-level hyperspace navigation abilities, Kamidake’s potential is far greater than her current capabilities… but the problem is she’s just so difficult to handle. Hopefully, this data collection will help us achieve more stable operation.”

“The only way to improve beyond that is through age and accumulated experience.”

“Yeah... I guess so.” Amane stared at the neural construct’s pattern with an expression that suggested something didn’t quite add up.

“Is something bothering you?”

“I can't quite put it into words, but... something just doesn't feel right. The more data we gather, the more it feels like...”

“It’s unfair to expect so much all at once. It’s not something Neeju-sama would say, but Fuku-chan is still just a baby, after all.”

“That’s true. Still, it’s frustrating that whether the circumstances around us will allow for that is another matter entirely.”

“Thanks to Amane, we’ve managed to collect some pretty good data, so now it’s time for us to show what we’re made of. Even if we can’t quite reach the peak performance of the previous Kamidake, let’s do whatever it takes to build a subsystem that comes close.”

“You’re right. Then let’s finish organizing and integrating everything before the captain returns.”

“Hmm! We need to nourish our bodies and minds. We won’t be able to do anything if we’re tired.” Amane headed out to get food for the three of them, as usual, partly to clear her head.

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Stepping out into the living quarters, Seina took a deep breath, filling his lungs with the rich scent of grass and water. After the long, tense time spent on the bridge at Kamidake, it was an incredible feeling of relief. And Fuku felt it even more than Seina.

“Mi, mya~~~~n!” Fuku stretched out as far as she could, trembling all over for a moment, then exhaled deeply as she relaxed her body.

“Shall we go for a little walk?”

“Myaa!”

At Seina’s question, Fuku lifted her head happily and wagged her tail vigorously in agreement.

There were four teleportation gates around the circular pond, but they always used the one closest to home and had rarely done anything other than travel back and forth between there and the house. As a result, most of the staff residential area was unfamiliar territory to them. Naturally, the four large residential districts were, needless to say, completely unknown to

them.

Since this staff-only area was meant to be developed by the residents themselves, only a bare minimum of trees had been planted. That said, the trees covering the sky like a birdcage were magnificent, and simply looking at the various styles of houses around them was a breathtaking sight in itself.

Seina felt an urge to lie down right there, drawn by the sensation of the soft grass beneath his feet, it felt like slightly longer-than-usual lawn grass. He took off his shoes and felt the grass against his skin; it was softer than he'd imagined, and the tips didn't prickle at all.

"Ha ha!" Seina lay down on the spot, spreading his arms and legs wide.

Then Fuku imitated Seina and dove onto the grass.

"Does it feel good, Fuku?"

"Mya~~~n." Fuku meowed loudly, as if to express how she was feeling.

"I see. You feel good, huh?"

Seina and Fuku lay there, staring blankly at the trees covering the sky. Then, while still lying down, Fuku pushed off the ground with her hind legs and moved toward Seina's right hand, pressing her head firmly against it. Realizing what this meant, Seina stroked Fuku's head with his middle finger.

"Fumya~~…" Fuku purred contentedly and let her limbs go limp.

"Hey, Fuku… I know things must be tough for you, but Kiriko-san and the others are being strict with you because they care about you."

"Fumya, fumya~~n~"

Whether she was listening or not, Fuku was too busy rubbing her head against Seina's finger to care.

"Haha, are you even listening?"

Even as he said that Seina increased the speed at which he stroked Fuku, and began tickling not just her head, but her neck and belly as well.

"Fumya! Fumya! Fumyamyamya~~!!"

Fuku was kicking her limbs wildly and meowing as if she were being tickled, but finally, unable to take it anymore, she wriggled free from Seina's grasp.

Taking that as his cue, Seina sat up and said, "Well, I guess it's about time we headed home."

"Mi? …Mii."

However, knowing that she would be alone again once they got home, Fuku hesitated and

put some distance between herself and Seina.

“I see… I guess so.” Seina couldn’t say anything; he just stared intently at Fuku with a slightly sad expression.

If he looked at it pragmatically, it would be better for Fuku in the long run to be scared for a few hours here than to be scared every time they went on a mission. But the fact remained that both situations were scary. Moreover, having come all this way alone and feeling lonely, Seina understood Fuku’s feelings all too well. So he waited, staring intently at Fuku until she could sort out her feelings.

“……Mya”

Fuku had been staring intently at Seina’s expression as well, but having apparently made up her mind, she approached Seina with awkward steps.

“Good girl. Let’s go home, then.”

Despite all her grumbling, Seina was touched by Fuku’s thoughtful consideration of his feelings. He stroked her a little roughly, as if savoring her happiness, then wrapped her in her favorite towel and picked her up. Holding Fuku tightly against his chest, he set off for home.

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“Okay, Fuku, I’m off then.”

Just like yesterday, after finishing his meal and bath, Seina activated the bedroom shield and headed for the Kamidake Bridge.

“Meow… Meow.” Fuku meowed sadly, watching Seina until his footsteps faded away, then jumped onto the bed and curled up in her favorite towel. There, she could smell Seina’s scent even more strongly than yesterday, along with the scents of Kiriko and the others.

“Mya~~n♡”

Fuku closed her eyes and sniffed desperately, trying to sense Seina presence. Comforted by the warm towel and the sense of security it provided, Fuku began to suck on the towel, and just like the day before, she gradually drifted off into a light sleep.

Three hours later, Fuku was woken up by Seina’s return. Just like that morning, Fuku’s eyes filled with tears as she clung to Seina. However, Fuku’s emotions stabilized afterward, and she woke up in a good mood that morning.

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By the time Seina and Fuku got to the living room, Kiriko and the girls had already arrived, and breakfast was almost ready.

“Myaa!” Spotting Amane and the girls in the tatami room, Fuku scampered over to them.

“Good morning, Amane-san, Elma-san.”

“Good morning. The little one’s in a much better mood than yesterday.”

Fuku let Amane pet her and wagged her tail vigorously.

“Last night, after the verification experiment ended and I got home, I woke her up and then we went to sleep together.”

“That’s why she’s so calm. Now, Fuku-chan and Seina-chan, please sit down.” Kiriko brought over a pot of miso soup, sat down in her usual spot, and began serving rice.

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“Seina-chan, Amane and Elma, you don’t need to help with the cleanup, please go to the bridge first.” After the meal, Kiriko stopped Seina, who was trying to help with the cleanup.

“That’s fine, but wouldn’t it go faster if we all did it together?”

“I’d like to start cleaning up the whole house soon.”

“The whole house? But this house has auto-maintenance, right?”

The house’s maintenance was handled almost entirely by micromachines and nanomachines, keeping it spotless. The saying “A Widower Is Overrun with Maggots” simply didn’t apply here.

“Depending on your lifestyle, though, if you don’t customize things properly, unexpected glitches can pop up.”

“Oh, really?” Seina looked around, but couldn’t spot anything out of place.

“Kiriko is a perfectionist when it comes to housework… or rather, it’s a kind of hobby for her. You can just leave it to her.”

“Alright, I’ll leave it to you then.”

Noticing a certain sparkle in Kiriko’s eyes, Seina remembered that this was Kiriko’s way of relieving stress, so he obediently did as Amane said.

“Leave it to me.”

“Well then, we’ll go ahead.”

Leaving Kiriko behind, Seina and the rest of the crew headed for the bridge ahead of her.

“Well then, shall we get started? ♡”

After seeing Seina and the girls off, Kiriko turned back toward the living room with a look of sheer delight on her face. That said, if she just went about it aimlessly, it would take forever. Kiriko was well aware of the weaknesses of this kind of maintenance system. And of Seina’s habits, too.

“Ah, just as I thought.”

Kiriko scanned a few spots she’d had her eye on. Just as she’d expected, small piles of dust had formed there. This, too, was a result of Seina’s probability bias.

For Seina, the inside of the house was no different from a danger zone. From discarded clothes to magazines casually left lying around, from appliances and furniture placement to the grain of the tatami mats and frayed edges of the carpet, there was no telling what might trigger a disaster. That’s why Seina kept things tidy on a regular basis and tended not to leave things lying around. He also made slight adjustments to the position of his furniture whenever something came up. Seina’s current worry was the presence of Fuku, who kept clinging to his feet.

“Even so, it's still Washu-sama's system after all. There's far less dust accumulation than I expected...oh?”

As she fine-tuned the system, Kiriko suddenly noticed that Fuku’s favorite towel was lying on her bed.

“...I see. She seemed to be in such a good mood this morning, so she must have forgotten. It’s Fuku-chan’s favorite, so I’ll take it to her...”

As Kiriko picked up the towel, she noticed it was quite dirty. This was because Fuku tended to drag the towel along when she carried it, and also because she had gone for a walk in the park with Seina yesterday and rolled around in the grass.

“Maybe I should train her not to bring it onto the bridge…”

That was just an excuse to convince herself; the truth was, she couldn’t stand the dirt, and the urge to wash it was overwhelming.

But what really sealed the deal was, “What’s this!?”

She had found several spots on the towel where the fabric had become frayed and it had hardened a bit, as if it had been starched.

(C-could this possibly be~~~!!)

It was, without a doubt, the spot where Fuku had been sucking on the towel.

“No, Fuku-chan!!”

Kiriko had no doubts left. There was absolutely, positively no way she could ever, under any circumstances, allow little Fuku (though it wouldn’t be okay even when she grew up) to keep something she put in her mouth dirty!

Kiriko shoved the towel into the sterilization and cleaning system.

×××

“Myaa!”

Just then, on the bridge, Fuku realized she’d forgotten her towel.

“Myaa! Myaa!” Fuku looked anxious and paced restlessly across the table.

“What’s wrong?”

“It looks like she left her favorite towel behind.”

“Oh, is that why you're so restless... But you didn't have it this morning, did you?”

“Now that you mention it, you’re right.”

“Kiriko should still be over there. Should I ask her to bring it? Well, even if we had the towel, we couldn’t really keep it here, though.”

“Hmm... I guess so...”

Seina picked up Fuku, wrapped his arms around her, and gently stroked her head.

“Fuku, it’s okay, it’s okay. It’s just a test today, so there’s nothing to be afraid of.”

“Meow…”

“Let’s wait until after work, when we get home, for your towel.” Saying that, Seina held Fuku close for a while.

Then Fuku started wagging her tail, “...Meow,” she meowed softly.

For Fuku, her dependence on the towel was merely a substitute for Seina. And through her experiences over the past few days, she had remembered that tests weren’t scary.

“Alright. Let’s get ready, then.”

“Myaa.”

Seina placed Fuku on top of the repeater and began setting up the equipment.

“……Seina seems like he’d make a good father, doesn’t he?”

“That’s true.”

Amane and Elma blushed at the sight, then leaned in close to each other and whispered to one another.

A few minutes later, Kiriko arrived on the bridge and felt relieved to see Fuku sitting quietly on the relay unit as usual.

“Well then, let’s get started.”

Meanwhile, at Amane's house, a monstrous demon, or rather, NB (operated by Airi), was about to be revived.

Even when it came to freezing time, there were levels of ability. Unless you were in a specialized facility like an Imperial Ship or the Academy, you couldn't create a state of complete stasis. And it was impossible to generate that field at a single point inside a house. That said, the technology that managed to freeze time for over seven hours, even though it took less than a second to grasp the field's properties and activate a countermeasure, was no ordinary feat.

"You little brats~~!! You actually managed to trap me in a place like this!" NB shouted in a menacing voice as he broke free from the time-stopping field that had been moved into the living room

"Oh, Demon King. Have you been resurrected?"

"So you really did have an acceleration device after all."

"It was faster than I expected, but it was just as I thought."

"……"

Hakuren and the others, who had been having tea there, glanced at NB and immediately resumed their chatter.

"H-hey, you little brats! Don't you dare ignore me!"

"Yes, yes. Just as expected of an NB built by Airi-sama. Escaping even a time freeze, that's amazing, amazing!"

"Amazing, amazing." Hakuren and the others said in a half-hearted, monotone voice, without even looking at the NB.

"Are you lot making fun of me?!"

"In that case, you should have just come over here or contacted us, shouldn't you? You must have noticed immediately that something was wrong with NB."

"Ugh!" NB (controlled by Airi) was speechless, having been called out.

"Even if you noticed something was wrong, you probably thought, 'If the person just came over here like that, it would feel like I'd lost as a scientist, I hate that!' or something like that, right?"

"Ugh!"

"Anyway, I'll listen to your complaints, so go ahead."

“Ugh, ugh... waaaaaah!!”

Thus, the Demon King was easily defeated by the four heroes.

×××

“Waaah... They made fun of me...”

The Demon King’s true form, or rather, Airi, was clinging to Mikami and crying in the principal’s office.

“Well, it’s the truth, so I suppose there’s nothing to be done about it, ho ho ho.”

“What do you mean, ‘the truth’!? What part of me are you calling stupid?!” Airi suddenly snapped her head up and glared at Mikami.

“Having watched you wander around the room since this morning, pulling a hundred different faces of joy, anger, sorrow, and pleasure, I think that’s a fair assessment.”

“B-but…”

“You lose the moment I see your weakness, ho ho ho.”

“They're oblivious to the important things, but lately they've become surprisingly tough in areas like this... Honestly, those girls!”

“If Airi-sama is going to treat you like a toy, you might as well put up a fight. She’s at least letting you vent to me, so get it off your chest and get back to work!”

Airi’s chief secretary glared at her, a vein throbbing at her temple. She’d reached her limit with Airi, who’d been impossible to work with since morning. She looked like a wolf baring its fangs and growling.

“Huh? Oh?”

Mikami, her usual lifeline, avoided getting involved and quickly fled to the other side of the secretary corps.

“U-um. Uh…”

Airi felt like a rabbit cornered against the wall.

Chapter Ten: Fuku · Escape

That day, Kamidake was engaged in a combat simulation with Amane’s system that was as realistic as actual combat. From space to the planet’s surface, Amane toyed with Kamidake using incredible speed and tricky maneuvers while changing various conditions; Fuku learned a lot and had Kamidake respond with only the bare minimum of evasive actions.

“Mya! Mya! Meow!”

Having grown accustomed to the situation over the past few days, Fuku was delighted, like a child enjoying a game. However, perhaps due to fatigue from the prolonged battle, Kamidake was struck by Amane's continuous attacks and was deemed unable to navigate.

"Kiriko-san, the neural network's processing speed is rapidly declining and appears to have reached its limit, but the results are better than expected."

"I see. Then we'll conclude data collection for now."

"Roger. Resetting the simulation program. Moving the Kamidake back to its designated position."

Kiriko and Elma watched the data monitors displayed on the bridge with delight, processing the information at an impressive speed.

"Captain, please remove Fuku-chan's equipment."

"Understood. Thank you for your hard work." Seina approached Fuku and removed the equipment with practiced ease.

"Mya~~~..."

Though Fuku was completely exhausted, she was delighted to be picked up by Seina and have her head stroked.

"Well then, I'm going home for a bit." Seina placed Fuku on his head and headed for the teleportation gate.

"Good work."

After seeing Seina off, Amane went to get dinner for the three of them as usual, while Kiriko and Elma, who were left behind, began processing the data.

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"Oh! No!"

Kiriko suddenly jumped to her feet. It was around the time Seina had finished his meal, the data processing was nearing completion, and Fuku was likely already asleep.

"I was washing Fuku-chan's towel. I have to give it to her."

"Don't you have plenty of the same towels?"

"Strangely enough, with things like that, she apparently insists on using that one."

"I see. Well, please go and do it right away. I'll take care of the rest."

"Sorry about that."

Kiriko quickly darted through the teleportation gate and headed at full speed toward Seina's

house.

She opened the door, took Fuku's towel out of the basket of clean laundry, and headed to the bedroom.

"I'm sorry, Fuku-chan."

She practically burst into the bedroom, and just as Kiriko had expected, Fuku was there with tears welling up in her eyes, clinging to Seina's feet.

"Mya? Myaa!"

Noticing the towel Kiriko was holding, Fuku charged toward her.

"Kiriko-san, that towel…"

"I'm sorry. It was so dirty, I just couldn't stand it… Plus, there were marks where Fuku-chan had put it in her mouth and sucked on it, so I washed it."

"Is that so…? That's great, Fuku."

Just as Seina was about to take the towel from Kiriko, a message addressed to him suddenly came in.

The very next moment, "Ma~~ster!!" NB's loud voice echoed throughout the room.

"!!?"Kiriko instinctively scooped up Fuku and hid behind the screen.

"Master! Master! That's so mean!! You're leaving me out of the loop, aren't you~~!"

"H-hey. Calm down."

"How the hell am I supposed to stay calm!! Where the heck did those spoiled brats go? They're all ignoring my calls!"

Hearing NB's words, Seina vaguely understood why Kiriko had hidden with Fuku.

"I get it, I get it. I'll listen to you, but let's go over there first. We can't have a calm conversation here." Seina headed toward the living room, carrying the communication monitor with him.

"Myaa!"

“Fuku-chan”

Kiriko held back Fuku, who was trying to follow Seina. Then, waiting for the right moment, she quietly took Fuku to the living room and made sure she saw that Seina had set up a secret wall. Fuku seemed to give up and calmed down.

“Elma, are you there?” Kiriko opened a communication channel to the bridge.

“Ah, Kiriko-san. It seems NB has broken through the time-freezing barrier.”

“Seina-chan is dealing with him right now. I’d like to stay with Fuku-chan, so could we postpone the verification experiment for a bit?”

“Sure, that’s fine. We’ll be finishing up here soon. I feel bad for Seina-kun, but I’m grateful he’s helping Airi-sama blow off some steam.”

“Alright, I’ll leave it to you then.”

Kiriko ended the call and headed to the bedroom. She laid Fuku down on the bed and draped her favorite towel over her.

“Now, Fuku-chan, time for a nap, okay?”

“Myaa?” But Fuku sniffed the towel and realized Seina’s scent wasn’t there.

“Myaa! Myaa!”

“It’s okay. I’ll stay here with you until Seina-chan comes.” Kiriko said as she stroked Fuku.

Perhaps understanding Kiriko’s words, Fuku seemed a little restless but gently lay down on the bed.

“But you just have to be patient a little longer, okay?”

“Myaa?” Fuku looked up at Kiriko’s face, looking puzzled.

“Once we finish collecting this data, Fuku-chan won’t have to get on the ship anymore. …You won’t have to be scared anymore.”

“Myaa!?” Fuku looked up at Kiriko in surprise, tears welling up in her eyes.

“Wh-what’s wrong? Did you remember something scary?” Kiriko quickly wiped Fuku’s tears with a towel, then gently stroked her, cradling her in both hands.

“I’m sorry. It’s okay, it’s okay. There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

“Meow… Meow”

Fuku wouldn’t stop crying, so Kiriko continued to stroke her gently, trying to calm her down. Then Fuku took Kiriko’s little finger in her mouth and began sucking on it as if she were drinking breast milk.

“Oh my… hehe.” Enduring that adorable, ticklish sensation, a smile spread across Kiriko’s face.

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About an hour later, Seina was finally freed from NB (controlled by Airi) and staggered toward the bedroom.

“Phew, that was quite an ordeal. But given how he was acting, maybe it was the right call not to bring him along this time… Hmm?”

Seina noticed that the bedroom was unusually quiet and peeked inside quietly, trying not to make a sound. There he saw Kiriko, gazing at the sleeping Fuku with gentle eyes.

(Aunt… Tsukiko?)

For a moment, that figure overlapped in Seina’s mind with Tsukiko. It was exactly like Tsukiko gazing at the sleeping Kai back in his childhood.

(I used to be so jealous of Kai.)

At that time, Seina's mother was worn down by Seina's probability bias. When Seina was asleep, the damage was much less than usual. This was the only time his mother could take her eyes off Seina and have some peace of mind, so she was desperate to get Seina to sleep. For the sake of his mother, who looked at him with pleading eyes, Seina had no choice but to learn to pretend to fall asleep easily.

“……!”

Noticing Seina’s presence, Kiriko quietly moved away from Fuku and raised the shield. Then, taking care not to make a sound, she left the bedroom with Seina.

“I’m sorry I made you deal with NB.”

“I guess I made the right call not bringing him along. He even asked me which I’d choose, Fuku or him… Anyway, I’m exhausted.”

“Huh... What a headache.”

“Fuku seems to have slept well. When I saw the two of you together, it reminded me of Aunt Tsukiko and Kai.”

“R-really?” Kiriko couldn’t tell if that was a compliment directed at her or if Seina was simply thinking of Tsukiko.

To Kiriko, Tsukiko was now a rival. She felt an urge to question Seina about the meaning of his words, but the feeling of Fuku sucking on her little finger overpowered that urge. And Seina, too, was struggling to control the rapid beating of his own heart.

“……!!”

Kiriko's expression as she gazed at her little finger and smiled was incredibly captivating, and Seina, not wanting her to hear the sound of his own heartbeat, unconsciously quickened his pace to put some distance between himself and Kiriko.

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"Ah, Captain. Are you all right?" Elma said as soon as she saw Seina and Kiriko rush into the bridge.

"I had to listen to NB complain nonstop for nearly an hour."

"That must have been a real ordeal. Well, thanks to the captain acting as a decoy, we're all set, we can start anytime."

With a wry smile at Amane's words, Seina and Kiriko took their seats. Kiriko quickly assessed the situation and got everything ready.

"Still, the data collection finished sooner than I expected."

"True. Thanks to that, we can spend all day tomorrow doing a comprehensive re-verification experiment. Though… I really wish we had a slightly higher-grade relay unit."

"I've asked a friend who might know of one, so hopefully soon… Oh, speak of the devil!"

With that, Elma winked at Kiriko and the others and activated the communication monitor.

"Hello, it's me… Wait! Really!?" Elma's expression lit up instantly.

She immediately put the communication on standby and looked at Kiriko.

"Apparently, a repeater has become available. It's a prototype developed for military use, and its specifications seem to be better than what we had anticipated. They said they'd pass it on to us if we provided them with trial data. What do you think?"

"Test data, huh… That sounds good, but…"

"We don't have to provide data related to Fuku, right?"

"Even with just the relay unit's data, they'll be able to figure out the user's and the ship's capabilities." Kiriko hesitated slightly.

Then, Elma canceled her standby mode and began speaking with the other party.

"Hey, who's in charge of the overall plan? ……Yeah, right. Since I'm the one handling it, sharing the data might be a bit tricky. ……Ah, I see. Got it." Elma returned to standby mode.

"They're doing parallel verification, so they said bug checks are fine. Also, apparently Seniwa is handling the orders."

"Mikami-sama's place, huh…"

Kiriko carefully weighed the various possibilities. Information related to the Fuku clan was still top secret. She wanted to avoid any careless leaks.

“Kamidake's data will be reported to the military sooner or later, right? Kiriko is basically affiliated with the military, after all.”

“I see. Someone at Airi-sama’s level would probably be noticed, but it should be fine with anyone else.”

“Sorry to keep you waiting. I'll gratefully accept it. What about collection? ...Okay, then please do that. Bye.”

“When can we pick it up?”

“Right away is fine. We’re set up to handle the handover the usual way.”

“If I hurry, it’ll be an hour round trip… which is ten hours in local time.”

“Are you going on the Kamidake?”

“Fuku-chan is on break, isn't she? It would be a shame to wake her up. My ship is on board, so let's go with that.”

“In that case, we should make good use of the travel time.”

“In that case, I’ll pilot, Kiriko and Elma will handle cargo retrieval and checks… and the captain can just stay behind, right?”

“That sounds good. Even with setup time, we’ll still have at least twelve hours left in the acceleration space, which is plenty of time for the verification experiment.”

“It’s settled, then. Captain, since we’re canceling this verification experiment, please go back to Fuku-chan.”

As if every second counted, Kiriko and the others stood up simultaneously, as if in a race, and ran toward the teleportation gate.

“Go on, then. Be careful…”

As the commotion died down, Seina looked around the bridge, now left completely alone. It was a space where not only was there no sign of human presence, but even the noise from outside could neither be heard nor felt.

“...I see. So this is what it’s like for Fuku.”

Realizing the situation Fuku was in, trapped inside the shield, cut off from contact with the ship, Seina shuddered slightly.

“I’ve got to get back to her soon.”

Seina deactivated the shield trapping Fuku from the bridge and hurried toward the transport

gate.

——Fuku was dreaming.

——It was a memory from before she was born.

——It was what happened after she was moved from Washu's shoulder to the egg nucleus.

——She could hear a voice.

"……Meow, meow, myaa."

"Hm? What's wrong, Ryo-Ohki?"

"Meow."

"Oh, this little one, huh? She's your… well, your little sister."

"Myaa! Myaan!"

A gentle voice and a happy-sounding voice. And the warm touch of a hand transmitted through the eggshell.

"Hehe... I wonder what kind of child she'll grow up to be. I'm looking forward to it."

With those words, Fuku's memory faded away.

——It's so long.

——A calm, yet quiet and lonely darkness.

Suddenly, light and a voice pierced through, and the first thing she recognized was Seina's face.

——Ah, this is the person! This is the person!

——I found him! I found him! I found him! I found him! I found him! I found him! I found him!!

No one told her. She just knew it was him. She sensed it.

——I'm so happy! I'm so happy! I'm so happy! I'm so happy! I'm so happy! I'm so happy!!

"Myaa!!"

Just as Fuku was about to pounce on Seina, she woke up.

“Myaa! Myaa! Myaa…”

No matter how hard she strained her eyes, Seina was nowhere to be seen, and there was no one in the dim, spacious room but Fuku. Suddenly overcome with fear, Fuku burrowed into the towel lying nearby. But the freshly laundered towel didn’t carry Seina’s scent. However, there was a faint trace of Kiriko’s scent on it, likely left when she brought the towel over.

“Myaa, mii…”

Fuku pressed her nose as hard as she could against the towel. That faint scent of Kiriko was a comfort to her right now, easing her fear.

Fuku loved Kiriko, Amane, Elma, Hakuren, Karen, Suiren, and Gyokuren. But she hated Kiriko and the others when they were on the bridge for work… no, perhaps it would be more accurate to say she was afraid of them, of course, even in their private time, Kiriko and the others would scold her mercilessly if she did something wrong. But Fuku had never felt that Kiriko and the others were scary or that she disliked them in those moments.

However, on the bridge, Kiriko and the others treated Fuku as if she were a machine. And not only that, Kiriko and the others were treated like machines themselves. This became especially noticeable when the battle began, making it feel as if only Fuku and Seina were left on the bridge.

Of course, Kiriko and the others had their reasons for acting that way. To support Seina, who possessed a unique statistical anomaly, they had to draw upon their maximum capabilities no matter what situation they encountered. That required cold, calculated judgment. But it was difficult for young Fuku to understand that. So, for Fuku, Seina was the only source of emotional support on the bridge.

“Mew… Mya”

Fuku was born to be Seina's ship. She was aware of that, and was happy about it. That's why Fuku felt that her current self was unnatural and inadequate. She vaguely understood that Kiriko and the others had built the subsystem for that reason.

But Kiriko said, “You don't have to go through scary experiences anymore.”

She felt sad. Even though she knew that wasn’t her intention, it felt as if she were saying, “I don’t need you anymore.” Instead of facing fear, she would have to wait for days… sometimes even months, while Seina and the others were away. She would have to endure the same feelings she was experiencing right now.

Fuku’s fear of pirate ships stemmed, first and foremost, from the fear of her own death. And then there was the terror of being unable to maneuver the ship as she pleased, it was the same as being unable to move your limbs even while under attack. It was the terror of being unable to defend herself with her own hands, evade attacks, or even flee properly.

And secondly, her own death and the destruction of the ship meant the death of Seina and the girls. For Fuku, that was the greatest fear of all. Thinking that she might never see Seina

again, she clung to her,

, Let's run! Let's run! Let's run away!!

Is all she can do.

"Myan! …Myaa…"

She wouldn't be able to see Seina anymore. Just thinking about it made tears stream down her face.

"……Mya!?" Just then, Fuku remembered the dream she'd had earlier.

——Ah, this little one, huh. You're… well, she's your little sister.

Washu's gentle voice.

——Myan! Myan.

The warm touch of Ryo-Ohki's hand, transmitted through the eggshell.

"Meow!!"

At that moment, Fuku had a sudden realization.

——Washu…… Mama will heal me!

——Ryo-Ohki…… Big sis will teach me how to maneuver the ship properly!

——And then! And then!

"Myaa! Myaa! Myaa!"

If she could learn to maneuver the ship well, she'd be able to stay with Seina all the time. Not just Seina, Kiriko and the others would surely praise her, too. Fuku imagined soaring through the skies with Seina and Kiriko, and her body trembled with sheer joy.

Viiiing! That feeling of joy was immediately transmitted to the ship. And that was precisely the moment Seina deactivated her shield and entered the teleportation gate.

"Ah… Huh?"

What Seina saw when he emerged from the teleportation gate was a beautiful starry sky, snow-capped peaks glowing faintly blue, and a landscape shrouded in rising steam.

“Why did I end up in the bathhouse??”

Seina hurried back to the teleportation gate and tried to set a destination, but the monitor showed no signs of turning on. However, since the gate itself seemed to be functioning normally, Seina decided to take a chance and step inside. But he found himself in a different part of the bathhouse. He wandered back and forth at random several times, but there was no sign of him being able to leave the bathhouse.

About two hours later, Seina finally decided it was a futile effort and sat down on a bench.

“Kiriko-san and the others won’t be back for another eight hours… I’m worried about Fuku, but there’s nothing I can do about it.”

Wiping the sweat from his brow, Seina stared at the bath in front of him. Then, without further ado, he took off his clothes and jumped into the tub.

“Phew… this feels good. Anyway, I’ll rest a bit, then try looking for the exit again.”

Seina stretched his arms and legs out fully in the tub and gazed intently at the breathtaking view of the sky. In fact, it was Fuku’s doing that Seina had been trapped here, she didn’t want him to stop her from heading to Earth.

A few hours after Fuku’s escape, in the chairman’s office, Airi listened to Kiriko and the others’ report. She didn’t get angry; she just stared intently at Kiriko, Hakuren, and the others. But that silence, in turn, weighed heavily on Kiriko and the girls as a silent pressure.

“We did receive a report from a patrol ship that happened to spot Kamidake, but there’s been no response since then, and communications are down.”

Mikami, who had been checking the monitor beside Airi, stood up with a deep sigh.

“That’s to be expected. Ryo-Ohki was famous for being hard to detect. The only reason she was able to infiltrate Jurai was because she got as close as possible to the main planet and launched a surprise attack with Gungnir.”

“That idiot Fuku, running away? What is she thinking?” Unable to bear the pressure of the moment, Amane muttered under her breath.

“I hear you guys… have built a full-scale subsystem?”

It wasn’t a glare, nor was it a threat, but Kiriko and the others flinched under Airi’s gaze.

“Seina-chan… no, the captain’s duties are still too much for Fuku-chan to handle, and we don’t have the luxury of waiting for her to grow into the role. Therefore, we determined that a subsystem was essential.” Kiriko tried to phrase it as objectively as possible.

Kamidake’s existence was still a top secret, and the ship was still in the experimental phase. Furthermore, Seina and Fuku were under Airi’s care and were not official members of the GP.

Moreover, since everyone present was practically family, centered around Seina, the conversation here was akin to a private one. However, this blunder was serious enough that, in the worst-case scenario, it might necessitate a complete overhaul of Seina's support staff. For that reason, Kiriko decided she should not compromise the relationship between superior and subordinate.

"We needed to buy some time and have a backup plan."

"We've been providing mental health support, so that shouldn't have been an issue…"

Following Kiriko's lead, Amane and Elma also sat up straight and added.

"We also believe Kiriko-san's judgment was correct." Hakuren and her team standing behind them nodded as well.

It was a clear indication that the responsibility lay with everyone present.

"...You're certainly all very capable." Airi said, sounding exasperated, as she listened to Kiriko and the others.

"Huh?"

"You calmly analyzed Fuku-chan. Even when she was scared and crying, lonely, or wanted to be pampered, you were able to calmly recognize her as a computer unit."

"No way, really!?"

"Of course, that was just on the bridge. The problem was that you weren't properly switching between your private life and your work…" Airi actually thought it was cuter when they're flustered and making excuses.

"But that's, "

"The reason that child fears combat is because you are all rejecting her. Deep down, you're treating her like an object."

"No way… We…"

"You're getting frustrated with a machine that isn't performing."

"That's…"

Finally, Kiriko and the others fell silent. Airi's words had shattered their position as her subordinates. Right now, Airi and Kiriko felt more like mother and daughter.

"It's a good thing to have affection, even for a machine. Pouring your affection into something means trying to get to know it… and besides, that child has a will of her own. If your wills connect, Fuku-chan… the ship will try to get to know you. That is the power of Ryo-Ohki. The power of the ships of Jurai… It's not the same as spoiling it. Hold it more, stroke it, and talk to it. To Washu-sama, Fuku-chan is like a daughter. You must think carefully once more about

the meaning behind her entrusting her to you."

"……We're so sorry."

Airi's words seemed to have taken a toll on Kiriko and the others, who hung their heads and looked dejected. The shock was particularly great for Kiriko and the other bridge crew members.

(It's true… Airi-sama is absolutely right. Seina-chan was always telling Fuku-chan, "It's okay," but I…)

Looking back, Fuku's pleading gaze on the bridge was always directed solely at Seina. Or rather, at Seina and Neeju. While Fuku would get close to Kiriko and the others and act affectionate in private, she had never once sought help from them on the bridge.

(Fuku-chan... I'm sorry.)

Thinking about how they treated the young Fuku, they couldn't help but deeply regret their own foolishness. Tears welled up in Kiriko and the others' eyes.

"...Bully." Seeing Kiriko and the others with tears in their eyes, Mikami glared sideways at Airi and whispered, just loud enough for her to hear.

"……W-well, since we're partly to blame for banning attacks on the very first mission, I can't really say it too harshly… But honestly, I wanted you to figure it out on your own."

"……Huh?"

Kiriko and the others wiped the tears from the corners of their eyes and looked up.

"Why do you think that bridge is shaped so that everyone faces Fuku-chan? Seina-kun seems to have noticed it subconsciously. There must have been a hint. When you jumped from hyperspace to higher hyperspace… you know?"

"……What do you mean?!"

Kiriko and the others recalled what had happened then and were desperately trying to understand what Airi meant.

"Still, starting with the research planet and then hacking into and manipulating the Academy's surveillance system… she's a truly terrifying child."

"She figured out the experimental planet's attack patterns in just a short time, after all…"

"Little kids have such incredible learning abilities, don't they… And since she was created by the legendary Philosopher, even the Academy is no match for her."

"It somehow reminds me of someone from the past, heh heh heh."

"... I would never forget to close the door when I break in and then leave!"

“Well, she’s still just a baby, so I suppose we’ll have to forgive her for that…” Mikami suddenly cut herself off and let out a deep sigh.

“Hm? What’s wrong?”

“Seriously... Why couldn't I figure out something this simple?”

“Did you figure out where Kamidake is headed?”

“There’s no point in investigating escape routes or anything like that. There’s only one place that child could be going… she’s going to her mother’s, isn’t she?”

“Ah!”

At Mikami’s words, everyone gasped in unison.

“Oh, her escape was so brilliant that I got completely distracted by it. I see… That’s a problem, then. Seina-kun is on the Kamidake too, isn’t he?”

“Ah!!” Kiriko and the others bolted toward the teleportation gate in the chairman’s office.

“Wait a minute, Kiriko-chan!”

“Shouldn’t we just leave it to them?”

“……I suppose you’re right.” Saying that, Airi began accessing NB.

Airi and the Mikami’s fears had come true.

Kamidake could deceive machines, but it couldn’t fool something more primitive: the human eye.

The Galaxy Academy was surrounded by several massive city rings along the outer edge of the solar system. While access to the inner rings required strict screening, the outer rings were quite open, anyone could freely visit, live, or work there. It would be no exaggeration to call it a spies’ paradise. It was forbidden to point surveillance devices into the Academy’s solar system, and optical defenses were in place. But there were no such rules beyond those rings.

Ships entering and leaving the Academy were also key targets for intelligence gathering. A team of spies lurking in the outer rings captured footage of the Kamidake leaving the Academy. That information was immediately passed on to the pirates.

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Before long, the pirates had cornered the Kamidake. Two of them, the brothers Wight and Jate, were trembling with excitement at their good fortune.

“Ahhh, big bro, we did it!”

“Yeah, we’re on a roll!”

For the pirates participating in this hunt, several rules had been established to ensure Kamidake’s capture. These were designed to prevent the competition from escalating to the point where they hindered one another and ended up destroying each other.

First, there were the ships that made a team contract with the ship equipped with the paint bullets to hold off Kamidake. Then there were the ships that actually hit Kamidake with their tractor beams and successfully captured it. And finally, there were the ships that were in the same space sector when the capture was completed. Those ships would receive the bounty and the resulting profits in order of their contribution.

“I wonder how much we’ll make, bro?”

“I bought this ship on a 300-year loan, but today I'm finally saying goodbye to that loan!”

“That much?! Wow !!”

“If we get the first hit with the tractor beam, forming a small fleet centered around large ships wouldn't be a pipe dream.”

“Really? With this many, though... If we split it up, it won't be that much...”

The number of ships already chasing Kamidake was approaching a hundred.

“Yamada Seina’s bounty isn’t just what’s been made public. Even within the Galactic Federation, there are plenty of people who see him as a hindrance to business. Plus, rumor has it that that ship is in the same class as the legendary Ryo-Ohki.”

“If that’s true, it’d probably sell for a pretty penny. But…” Even so, Jate remained skeptical.

“Ryo-Ohki fought on equal terms with an Imperial Ship! It’s basically a marvel of advanced technology… It’s worth more than any individual could afford, even some countries couldn’t buy it! …If the rumors are true, that is.”

“If that’s really true, then you’re absolutely right, bro!”

“All right! Guys, let’s give it our all!”

At Wight’s words, the men on the bridge cheered.

——Myaaaaaaaaaaaaaaan!!

“...Fuku!!”

Seina was awakened by Fuku’s scream echoing through the bathhouse. Exhaustion and the warmth of the bath had caused him to doze off.

Images of firefights crisscrossing the sky were projected, and Fuku’s screams echoed all

around. Without even wiping himself down, Seina quickly put on his uniform and ran straight for the teleportation gate.

He didn't know how things had come to this, but there was no doubt that a real battle with pirates was underway. Fortunately, the first gate he passed through led directly to the residential district, and from there, he just had to go through the gate by the central pond as usual to reach the bridge.

"Fuku!"

"Miyaaaaaaaaaaan!!"

Fuku was clinging to the relay unit, crying. It was because she was too terrified to move, and at the same time, she feared that if she left that spot, she would be shot down immediately. Driven solely by her desire not to let Seina die, Fuku was desperately holding her ground.

"Wait there, Fuku!" Seina sat down in his chair and connected the manual control line.

"Better safe than sorry, I guess. I'm glad I learned how to operate this."

Although he was making Fuku feel lonely, his participation in the verification experiment was not only his duty as captain, but also to train in the operation of Kamidake in case of an emergency.

"Myaaaaan!"

The moment she handed over control of the ship, Fuku couldn't hold back any longer and charged toward Seina, clinging to his knees sobbing.

"Fuku, it's okay now, really."

Seina spoke to Fuku, trying to calm her down. Even though she had handed over control, Fuku's influence hadn't completely disappeared. Her fear could still significantly affect the ship's handling at times. Next, Seina checked the ship's status on the external monitor.

"Just as I thought…"

There was red paint smeared all over the ship.

Fuku had almost no combat experience and lacked the wisdom to keep the enemy from reading her course. After escaping the Academy, Fuku had been sailing straight toward her destination. That's why she'd been ambushed by pirates and hit with paint rounds.

(But this situation is far better than it was back then.)

Unlike when he was running around carrying Seto's package, Kamidake's route was easy to read. Kiriko and the girls must have noticed Kamidake's absence long ago. The only sources of anxiety were his own probability bias and his inexperience as a pilot.

(But there's still a way!)

Recalling his training, Seina gripped the controller tightly and began maneuvering.

Kiriko and the girls poured into Kiriko's cruiser, which was docked at Amane's house, but since everyone was trying to rush in at once, they got stuck at the entrance.

"Hey, you guys! Don't rush, calm down a bit! There are some things I can't show you yet, so just wait a moment!"

Kiriko pushed her way through the human wall, entering the cabin and performing a biometric scan. Once authentication was complete and she confirmed access to a certain area had been granted, Kiriko unlocked the door. The moment she did, Amane and the rest burst in with the same momentum they'd had before.

"Calm down! From here, we can connect to most places."

Gathering around the table, Kiriko, Elma, Hakuren, and Suiren each booted up their monitors and began accessing their respective information networks.

"As expected of Airi-sama's cruiser! It's linked to nearly all of the Academy's upper-tier networks."

"To think it's even connected to Jurai's high-level network…" Hakuren looked at Kiriko with a surprised expression.

"Seto-sama probably already knows this, but please keep it confidential for now." Kiriko gently placed her index finger to her lips.

Although Airi and Seto were working together, since each of them bore the responsibility of their nation's interests, they did not exchange all information. Furthermore, since neither of them made decisions regarding national governance based solely on their own personal will, there were many instances where they could not convey the information they wished to share. For that reason, while fully aware that each had secretly infiltrated the higher-level networks to gather intelligence, they tacitly allowed it as a form of diplomatic maneuvering both within and outside the country. However, this was strictly a matter of personal responsibility, and if those at Hakuren's level were to find out, it would have to be formally addressed as an information leak incident. That would effectively shut down one of Airi and Seto's hotlines.

"Understood." Hakuren replied briefly and focused on her work.

"Got it! This is probably it!" Elma said as she accessed the pirate-related data.

"It seems footage of when Kamidake's disguise was exposed was broadcast to the other side. What's more, there are indications that it might be Seina-kun's ship."

Just then, a communication from Ryoko's first officer cut into the monitor Elma was watching.

"Captain, look at this!"

“What is this!?”

The online communication displayed by the first officer included a video reporting that Kamidake had been captured, along with a message inviting them to participate in the capture.

“It's quite a spectacle over there right now.”

“I see. Can you determine the exact location?”

“I'm checking right now. I'll let you know as soon as I find out anything.”

“Please do.”

“Kiriko-sama! We’ve picked up that information from Jurai as well.”

“The Academy’s Intelligence Division has it too. But Elma’s route is probably the fastest.”

Just as Kiriko said that, “It's here! Kiriko-san!”

Elma’s monitor began displaying Kamidake’s location and time of detection one after another. Kiriko cross-referenced the data and began searching for Kamidake’s location.

“I found it! ‘Breadcrumbs’… It’s definitely Kamidake!”

It was the hyperspace transmitter installed as a lesson learned from the Seto package incident, designed to pinpoint a location. Kiriko’s monitor data was shared with Elma, Hakuren, and the others, and everyone stared at it as if devouring it.

“They’ve gone all the way out to this sector!? But judging by the trajectory since they were detected, it looks like they took a paint round.”

“But Kamidake should have had the ability to remove that, right!?”

“Fuku must be in a panic. We need to send reinforcements quickly!”

“Judging by the posts from the pirates involved, there are quite a few of them. There’s no way a single ship could rescue them…”

“It’ll take time to assemble a large-scale rescue force!”

“Right, right. I’m pretty sure there’s a secret supply base belonging to Jurai nearby…”

Reaching out from beside Kiriko, Amane operated the monitor. The screen opened, displaying data on the supply base.

“H-how do you know about that, Amane-sama!?”

The moment Hakuren saw the data, her face turned pale and she jumped to her feet. Kiriko might know, but this wasn’t the kind of classified information Amane should have been privy to.

“Mihoshi invited me to go hang out there sometime.” Amane said it as if it were no big deal, with the same casualness as if she were suggesting a trip to an amusement park.

“Mihoshi-sama…”

“Well, she’d know, wouldn’t she?”

“……Y-yes, I suppose so.”

“Oh, if it’s here, you should be able to get there using the long-distance teleportation gate in the Chairman’s office.”

“Why do you know that Elma-sama!?”

“Huh? Well, there’s a chart with the teleportation codes and destinations posted right by the gate.”

Hakuren slumped over the table in response to that utterly unacceptable answer.

“Well, that place isn’t exactly somewhere ordinary people can just walk into, you know.”

As if to comfort her, Karen patted Hakuren on the shoulder. Of course, Karen was just as surprised as Hakuren, but since she was always paired with the utterly unreasonable Gyokuren, she had developed a certain immunity to it.

“……Confidential information, just spilling out everywhere.”

While feeling sorry for Hakuren’s flustered state, Kiriko also found it somewhat amusing, proof that she, too, had unconsciously been influenced by Airi and the others, carrying on the Masaki family bloodline.

“But at this point, there’s no helping it. I think it’s best to ask that person for help.” Hakuren’s feelings for Seina outweighed the shock of the leaked secrets, and she quickly pulled herself together and stood up with a heroic air.

“Let’s go!!”

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In the Chairman’s office, Airi and Mikami were relaxing, sipping tea and nibbling on takuan pickles. Just then, Kiriko’s group emerged from the standard teleportation gate and, with the sheer momentum of a herd of wild boars on a rampage, rushed past Airi and Mikami and entered the long-distance teleportation gate located at the far right of the Chairman’s office.

Beep, !! A shrill alarm blared.

“Overweight!?”

Kiriko and the girls exchanged puzzled glances. They knew that if anyone actually said the word “fat,” they’d waste precious time arguing.

“Damn it! Lighten the load!”

At Amane’s command, everyone stepped outside and began stripping off their clothes. This wasn’t just because they’d gained weight; it was also because each of them was wearing special equipment.

Thud! Thump! With sounds impossible for ordinary clothing, clothes were being cast aside left and right. Aside from the slightly eerie thumping sounds, Amane and Gyokuren, possessing an extraordinary beauty rarely seen, were joined by various types of beauties, all of them now naked. From a man’s perspective, it was nothing short of a paradise, a dream world.

Kiriko and the others took off all of their clothes and entered the long-distance teleportation gate once again. However...
Beeeeep!!
The weight limit alarm went off again, unsympathetically.

Having completely stripped down, Kiriko and the girls rushed back into the long-distance teleportation gate. However...

Beeeeep!! The weight-overload alarm rang out mercilessly once more.

“No way! We can’t possibly take off any more…!?”

“Ooh! Nice angle! What a view, what a view! If Master saw this, he’d definitely get a nosebleed. This is truly a paradise… no, maybe the Dragon Palace? Hahaha!”

Wham! NB was kicked out of the gate. At that very moment, a “ding-dong” sounded, signaling that the weight limit had been cleared, and Kiriko and the girls were teleported away.

“...They should’ve just gone one by one.”

The main cause of the weight overload was that the seven of them, Kiriko and the others, were packed like sardines into the long-distance teleportation gate.

“It seems my lecture was a bit too effective. Ho ho ho. …By the way, Airi-sama, do you know the saying, ‘If the pheasant doesn’t cry out, it won’t be shot’?”

“……What about it?”

“NB, was left behind.”

Mikami looked over at the NB, which had been trampled to a pulp and was now twisted out of shape.

“Aaaaaaaaaah... Damn it! I just let my true feelings slip...!”

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“Ah, this year's tea turned out great, didn't it?”

At almost the same time, Seto was relaxing with Minaho, sipping tea on Mikagami’s Bridge.

“Seto-sama. We have a communication from Amane-sama.”

Along with the operator’s voice, Amane’s figure appeared on the screen, dressed in a Juraian operator uniform.

“Please lend me Chobimaru!”

“!!??”

Her face appeared in close-up on the large monitor, her voice booming, Seto and everyone else were taken aback.

“Well, well, that’s quite direct. What do you plan to use Chobimaru for? Are you planning to start a war or something?”

Chobimaru was a planet-scale battleship. Moreover, it was a third-generation vessel. Although there are currently very few ships of this class in service, at full capacity, it could engage most nations in direct combat.

“Between the Neeju incident and everything before that, we’ve been through a lot.”

“Well, it’s true I owe you one, and I understand why you’re in a hurry, but…” Seto’s expression, which had been slightly exasperated, softened into a gentle smile.

Behind Amane, she could see the Chobimaru’s bridge, along with Kuramitsu Mashishu and Kiriko looking perplexed, and Hakuren and the others getting dressed.

“From now on, please stop asking for approval after the fact.”

“Thank you,” Amane said briefly before ending the call.

“Oh well, looks like this trip was for nothing.” Seto downed the tea in her cup in one gulp, looking dejected.

In fact, Mikagami was heading to the same place as Chobimaru.

“Looks like they beat us to it, didn’t they, Seto-sama?”

“You seem pretty happy about that, don’t you? Even though you missed your chance to perform your courtship dance.”

“Courtship?! …Wait, are you talking about the Triple Z?” Minaho’s cheeks flushed bright red as she looked at Seto.

“Ho-ho-ho.”

“That’s a pretty brutal dance. That’s more like blackmail than courtship, isn’t it?”

“You have to be that forceful if you want to win.”

“If Seto-sama would just make things a little easier for us, it would be easier for both me and Ringo-chan.”

“Oh dear, I’ve put my foot in my mouth. Well then, I suppose I’ll just watch from a little distance away.”

“Got it.” Minaho said and glanced at the operator.

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“... So, please take care of me!”

“Ugh...” Kuramitsu Mashishu, standing next to Amane, sighed in exasperation.

She was Kuramitsu Misao’s wife and Kamiki Seto’s adopted daughter. In a previous incident, she had plotted to assassinate Masaki Tenchi, only to be easily defeated herself… well, after various twists and turns, she ended up falling in love with Misao, whom she had long harbored feelings for. However, since Misao’s grandfather, Minami, opposed the marriage due to the difference in their social standing, Seto adopted Mashishu and arranged for them to marry. Of course, this wasn’t solely out of Seto’s benevolence; there was also the benefit of establishing a connection with the heir apparent of the Kuramitsu family.

“You, you…” Mashishu glared at Amane with piercing eyes.

Mashishu was originally a soldier. The left side of her face, blown off in a past battle, retained the natural color of the material used to reconstruct it. Her coarse, cat-like hair and rugged features gave her the appearance of a leopard.

“I've also gotten permission from Seto-sama.” Amane brushed off Mashishu’s words with a casual tone.

The two were friends through Mihoshi. Kiriko was in the same boat, but…

“I’m sorry, Mashishu-sama”

Feeling guilty about bringing trouble upon her, and with Mashishu now being Seto's adopted daughter, Kiriko couldn't be as comfortable around her as she was with Amane.

“Well, when it comes to a crisis involving Ryo-chan’s sister, I can’t say no. Besides, I was just about to do a test run anyway.” Perhaps sensing Kiriko’s feelings, Mashishu said with a smile.

“Mashishu-sama, a report from the lead ship: the sector where we’re scheduled to jump out is clear.”

“Good! Everyone, activate shock resistance!” Mashishu shouted in a crisp, commanding voice as she turned back toward the main monitor.

Chapter Eleven: Fuku · True Awakening

Creak, groan! Suddenly, the pirate ship's hull began to creak due to the resonance of the gravitational waves.

"What's this!?"

Wight and the others instinctively looked toward the operator.

"Forward section, detecting high-intensity shockwaves! Shit! This is some seriously massive thing!"

"Bro! These readings point to an Imperial Ship!"

Before Jayte could finish speaking, a massive wave of vibrations struck Wight's pirate ship.

"Damn! Could it be Jurai's Demon Princess!?"

"The mass ratio is different! This is a planet-scale ship!"

At that very moment, Chobimaru jumped out behind the pirates.

"A planet-scale ship, you say!? Are you telling me that's an Imperial Ship??"

Wight glanced at the planetary-scale ship behind them, then looked at Kamidake, seemingly unable to accept the situation.

"W-w-w-what do we do, big bro!?"

"This is no joke, it's a golden opportunity! We can't jump out of here right away anyway. While taking evasive action, maneuver the ship onto the line of sight between the Imperial Ship and our target!"

"Wait, bro, aren't we going to run away?"

"I told you, this is a gamble! If the Imperial Ship came to rescue that ship, we win. If they're just here to capture us, we lose!"

Whether it was because the prize of Kamidake was simply too tempting, or whether this was another result of Seina's probability bias, not a single ship broke away.

On Chobimaru's bridge, images of each pirate ship appeared at a furious pace, and the bridge operators were conducting searches on each one. Then, an image of Kamidake was picked out from among them.

"Kamidake confirmed!"

As the operator at the upper console near the captain's chair reported, Kiriko reached over and manipulated the console. The blurry image instantly cleared up. Impressed by her skill, the operator looked up at Kiriko in surprise.

"It's that paint round after all. Use the laser for communication!"

"Kiriko, wait!"

"Mashishu-sama?"

"Chobimaru! Can you talk to that child?" Mashishu looked at the Royal Tree at the rear of the bridge.

——A rustling sound...

Along with the rustling of the leaves, laser-like beams of neural light began to radiate one after another from the tree toward the terminals arranged around the small fountain. They made a sound like a **water harp** and played a melody like music. But that soothing sound suddenly disrupted.

"……Chobimaru!? What's wrong?"

The moment Mashishu called out, images of Kamidake's bridge began to appear one after another on the massive bridge.

"Myaaaaaaaahn! Myaa! Myaaaaaaaahn!!"

Suddenly, Chobimaru's bridge was filled with Fuku's shrill cries.

"Fuku-chan!? Captain!" Kiriko spoke to Seina, who appeared on the monitor.

"Kiriko-san!? Wait, how did the communication, ?"

"It's the power of the Royal Tree on this ship. More importantly, can't we somehow put some distance between us and the pirates?"

"That's the problem… these paint rounds seem to have been modified, so we can't even use short-range jumps!"

"What!? Can't you remove the paint? Fuku-chan!"

Perhaps noticing Kiriko's call, Fuku, who had been burying her face in Seina's lap and crying, turned toward Kiriko and cried out as if pleading for help.

"Myaaaaaaaahn! Myaa! Myaaaaaaaahn!!"

"……"

The moment Fuku's tearful face came into view, Chobimaru's bridge fell silent as if someone had poured water on everyone there. All the crew members stared at Fuku in stunned silence, but the next instant,

——Snap

Just as it sounded like something had snapped, all of Chobimaru's armaments suddenly jutted out from the hull like a hedgehog, as if reflecting the crew's emotions.

"I won't let a single one of them return alive!" One of Mashishu's subordinates muttered in a low voice.

There was no way she could hold back after seeing the adorable little one crying. And it wasn't just her, it was the sentiment of nearly every woman present.

"Calm down! As long as Kamidake is being used as a shield, we can't attack!"

Chobimaru was equipped with only its first-stage armaments, all of which were S-class turrets, meaning even at minimum power, there was a risk of injuring Kamidake.

"Damn it! If only Chobimaru's equipment were fully operational!"

At Mashishu's calm words, the others bit their lips in frustration.

"Ugh… aren't they going to shoot?"

"Ha ha ha ha! Just as I thought. With their armaments, there's a risk of dragging that ship into it too! We're lucky!"

"It looks like they're still in the middle of re-equipping. There are signs of repairs on the hull, too."

Chobimaru's hull was covered in graffiti drawn by Ryoko using Ryo-Ohki, enough to cover an entire continent. If the pirates had known what it meant, they would have burst out laughing. But no one realized that the fading scars were actually graffiti.

"But bro, if it's that big, doesn't it have a fleet or something on board?"

"If that were the case, they'd have deployed them the moment they jumped out."

"I see. As expected of my big brother."

"Anyway, we can't just stay like this forever. They know our position. We don't know when reinforcements might arrive."

"Captain, we've received operational orders from the fleet flagship. The plan is for large ships to act as a shield, while small and medium-sized ships use short-range jumps to flank the target and capture it with tractor beams!"

"How much longer until we're ready to jump?"

"Thirty seconds!"

“Alright, we’re going to be the first ones there! Don’t screw this up!”

“With Seina-kun and Kamidake, the pirates aren’t going to give up that easily.” Minaho said, watching the battle from Mikagami’s bridge, looked a little anxious.

“They’re just second- and third-rate scum, after all. Though, to be honest, Mashishu and the others are pretty sloppy if they let themselves get pushed around by the likes of them.”

“Isn’t that a bit harsh? We’ve only just started modifying the Chobimaru, so I doubt it’s ready for delicate work like this yet. Unless you’re planning to annihilate an entire fleet, that is.”

“Oh, how kind of you. You should just barge in, settle this quickly, and take the best parts for yourself.”

“If we wait until the very last moment and it doesn’t work out, then there’s nothing we can do… But I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Because Seina-kun is piloting the Kamidake.” Minaho smiled sweetly, leaving Seto speechless.

“Ugh! If this keeps up…”

As Kiriko desperately tried to think of a way to break this deadlock, Airi’s words suddenly came back to her.

“——Why do you think that bridge is shaped so that everyone faces Fuku-chan?”

“There must have been a hint. When we jumped from hyperspace to higher hyperspace… you know.”

“Could it be!”

Realizing something, Kiriko shouted loudly to Seina. “Seina-chan, position our video feed where we usually sit!”

“Got it!”

Without asking what she meant, Seina did exactly as Kiriko said.

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Once the video monitors showing Kiriko and the girls were positioned around the table on the Kamidake’s bridge, Kiriko was the first to call out to Fuku.

“Fuku-chan! Fuku-chan!”

“Fuku! Hey, Fuku!” Realizing Kiriko’s intention, Amane called out as well.

Then Elma called out, “Fuku-chan. Answer us, Fuku-chan!”

And Hakuren too, “Fuku-chan!”

Karen, “Hey, Fuku!”

Gyokuren said, “Fuku-chan!”

“……Fuku-chan.” Suiren, too, shouted with all her might.

“Fuku. Look, everyone’s calling you. They’ve come to save you.”

“Mya, myaa?” Fuku looked up at Seina with teary eyes.

“Fuku-chan!” “Fuku!” “Fuku-chan!” “Fuku-chan!” “Fuku!” “Fuku-chan!” “……Fuku-chan”

“Myaa?”

“You know, you’re the little sister of Ryo-Ohki, the amazing ship that’s become a legend. And you’re not alone anymore. Everyone… they’re all here for you!”

“Fuku-chan!” “Fuku!” “Fuku-chan!” “Fuku-chan!” “Fuku!” “Fuku-chan!” “……Fuku-chan”

“Myaa! Myaa!”

As if pushed by Seina’s words and drawn by Kiriko and the others’ voices, Fuku leapt onto the table in the center.

“Fuku-chan!”

“Myaa!”

Kiriko called out, and Fuku answered.

“Fuku!”

“Myaa!”

Amane called out, and Fuku answered.

“Fuku-chan!”

“Myaa!”

Elma called out, and Fuku answered.

“Fuku-chan!”

“Myaa!”

Hakuren called out, and Fuku answered.

“Fuku!”

“Myaa!”

Karen called out, and Fuku answered.

“Fuku-chan!”

“Myaa!”

Gyokuren called out, and Fuku answered.

“……Fuku-chan”

“Myaa!”

Suiren called out, and Fuku answered.

——I understand! I understand! I understand! I understand! I understand! I get it! I get it !!

——Kiriko, Amane, Elma, Hakuren, Karen, Gyokuren, Suiren!

——I understand everything you want to do, everything you seek!

“Myaa! Myaa! Myaa! Myaa! Myaa! Myaa! Myaa! Myaa!!” Fuku danced with wild joy, spinning round and round on the table, as if called by everyone’s voices.

……And then.

“Fuku!”

As if answering Seina's call, "Myaooooooooooooooooooooooon!!" She let out a loud cry.

In that instant, Fuku's neural network connected to all of Kamidake's systems.

Viiiinn!! Accompanied by a high-pitched vibration, the paint clinging to Kamidake's hull vanished in an instant, and the gravitational energy generated at that moment deflected the pirates' tractor beam. Without even needing to use teleportation, it broke free from the pirates' encirclement in the blink of an eye with movements impossible for an ordinary ship.

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"We did it!"

"Good! Prepare the main guns!"

As if to drown out Kiriko and the girls' cheers, Mashishu raised her voice. Her expression was even more consumed by rage than Kiriko and the others had been moments before.

"Whaaaaaaaaaaat!?"

"Ah, I knew it. It seemed strange that the captain would just be sitting there quietly."

Ignoring Kiriko and the others, who were stunned by this sudden change, Mashishu's subordinates frowned and began whispering among themselves.

"No matter what, she's the one who loves cute things the most, after all."

"……Oh? But that's too bad. We've received an arrest order from Seto-sama… Captain, please cease fire."

"Shut up! I'm definitely going to kill those guys!"

Although one of the subordinates relayed Seto's orders, Mashishu recalled Fuku's tearful face and had tears welling up in the corners of her eyes.

Whoa! Oh no! Everyone, please stop our captain!"

"Chobimaru! Fire the main guns...!!"

Just as Mashishu was about to give the order, Kiriko and the girls all rushed at her and covered her mouth.

“Ugh! Guh! Guh-guh-guh-guh-guh~~!!”

“Come on, calm down, Mashishu! It's an order from your scary mom~~”

Even Seto’s authority couldn’t reign Mashishu in right now.

“Hurry up and issue a surrender ultimatum to the pirates!”

“R-Right, got it!”

At Kiriko’s shout, Mashishu’s subordinates frantically called out to the pirates over the open channel.

“Bro... it's no use! We're completely locked down.”

“You idiot! Don't give up yet!”

“Hey, we’re up against an Imperial Ship, right? If we make a wrong move and get hit with a Genocide Dance, that’ll be the end of us!”

“The Genocide Dance is effective because it creates a localized gravitational shock when they jump out, blocking our jump! If every ship here jumps at once, at least some of us can get away!”

“Whaaaat!? No way, man, my luck’s been terrible today!” Jate started crying like a child.

“Captain! We’ve received a jump proposal via the network!”

“Alright! Synchronize with that timing!”

“Roger! Whoa, that was close, I barely made the sync! Eight, seven, six, five, four...”

“Bro!”

“Shut up!”

“……Three, two, one……”

And just as the pirate ships were about to jump…

——Migyaaaaaaaaaaooooooon!!!

Accompanied by a tremendous shockwave, Ryo-Ohki burst out of hyperspace.

Fortunately for the pirates, since they were already in a jumping stance, even though their

inertial control systems couldn't fully absorb the space-shaking vibrations, they managed to avoid serious injury.

"Captain, it's Ryo-Ohki!"

"What!? Did it come to save us?"

Many of the pirates present immediately thought the same thing. The impression that Ryo-Ohki was still an enemy of Jurai remained strong among the pirates. The recent incident had only been exaggerated in terms of Ryo-Ohki's return, so those at the lower ranks mistakenly believed that Ryo-Ohki was an ally.

——Migyaaaaaaaaaaooooooon!!!

But as time passed and Ryo-Ohki still didn't attack Chobimaru, the Wights began to get suspicious.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!" Jate realized something important.

"What the hell? Why are you suddenly yelling so loud!?"

"Ah… Big Bro. That ship we were chasing just a moment ago…"

"That ship we were chasing has nothing to do with this now… Wait!"

That's right, the ship the pirates had been chasing earlier was the sister ship of Ryo-Ohki, meaning that Kamidake was Ryo-Ohki's "sister." The pirates had no way of knowing that, but Jate clearly understood that she had come to exact revenge for the mistreatment her "family".

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Ryo-Ohki was still generating gravitational waves, making it impossible to escape via hyperspace jump. This meant they had no choice but to accept Jurai's demand for surrender. But there was something even more terrifying right in front of her.

——Migyaaaaaaaaaooooooo!

It was a terror akin to watching a meteor the size of the entire sky, enough to engulf every human on the planet, plummeting straight toward them. It was a terror that left them unable to flee, protect themselves, or eliminate the threat. The pirates were so terrified that they were literally voiding themselves, literally, from every orifice: eyes, nose, mouth, and everything else.

"……H-h-h-h-help meeeeeeeeeee!! We'll surrender, we'll surrender, so please help usssssssssssssssssssss!"

As a result, the pirates, completely disregarding their dignity, begged their enemy, Chobimaru, for help.

——Migyaaaaaaan!!!

That said, Ryo-Ohki's rage wouldn't subside so easily. Hearing the cries of her younger sister, Fuku, she had come all this way, driven by the sheer force of her anger. She was dying to bring her raised hand crashing down.

And then, at that moment...

——Myaa.

Kamidake approached, as if speaking to Ryo-Ohki.

——Myaaaaaaaoooo…on?

——Myaa, myaa.

Kamidake began flying around Ryo-Ohki, as if rubbing against her.

——Mya, myaa.

——……Meow……Myaa?

——Myaa! Myaa!

——Myaa!

Seeing Kamidake flying around happily, overjoyed to see her sister, Ryo-Ohki's anger completely subsided. So the two ships began flying, entangled together like kittens playing.

——Meow! Myaa!

——Myaa! Myaa! Myaa!

With such joy, the two ships flew around together, as if they were inseparable, for what seemed like an eternity.

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"Somehow, it all worked out…" Seto looked at Minaho with a hint of regret. Her complex expression held many meanings.

"What are you getting at? If you're thinking something rude like 'my marriage prospects have been delayed again,' I'll tell Ringo-chan all about Seto-sama's this and that!" Minaho's eyes were unusually serious.

"W-w-w-w-what are you basing that on!? There's no way I'd think such a rude thing about my cute Minaho-chan! I was just thinking, 'It's so good that Kiriko-chan and the others managed to work it out all by themselves~~~. But it's a shame I didn't get a chance to step in~~~.'" Seto panicked to the point of looking ridiculous, desperately trying to cover her tracks.

(This is bad... I have to get rid of the evidence fast!)

After all, ever since Seina had come to space, Ringo's abilities had skyrocketed beyond Seto's expectations, and lately, she had become nothing short of a genius when it came to accounting. As a result, she received a constant stream of speaking engagement requests from everywhere, from the Tax Audit Department and the Imperial Household Internal Audit Department to the Intelligence Bureau and even the private sector, both at the central and local levels.

"Don't turn that girl into any more of a monster! Bring back the old Ringo-chan!" Seto screamed as if she were about to cry tears of blood. It was a cry from the bottom of her heart.

"It's your own fault. Either way, I think it was only a matter of time, even if I hadn't said anything." Minaho brushed it off casually.

(Oh, no! I have to do something...)

For Seto, this was no longer just about Kamidake.

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"Mya! Myaa!"

In the Royal Tree chamber at the back of Chobimaru's bridge, Fuku was playing with the Royal Tree "Chobimaru." Fuku ran around Chobimaru, while Chobimaru beamed neural light at Fuku to communicate.

"Captain, it's time to begin investigating the pirates we've taken into custody!"

"Um... just a little longer."

"No way! Come on, let's go!"

"We have properly recorded it on video."

"Aaaaaah, Fuku-chan, see you later!"

Mashishu, who had been watching Chobimaru and Fuku with a dreamy look on her face, was practically dragged out of the Royal Tree chamber by her subordinates.

"...So now Fuku-chan has finally gained complete control over the functions of the ship, hasn't she?"

Watching them go with a wry smile, Airi shifted her gaze to Kiriko and the others.

"I'm sorry for causing you worry."

Standing before the monitor showing Airi, Kiriko and the others bowed deeply.

"Well, in the end, Fuku-chan and Kamidake's full synchronization is complete, and we've captured a large number of pirates… Well, that should give us plenty of room to spin the story to the outside world. For now, please submit a detailed report within twenty-four hours."

“Understood.”

“Speaking of which, Seina-kun. What happened to Ryo-chan?”

“Well… Ryoko-san scolded her, so she rushed back. I wanted to thank her for everything, but…”

“That works out perfectly. I’ll give you a little time off, so go back to Earth.”

“Huh!? But...”

“The GP Academy will be on break soon, and it’s about time you showed your parents that you’re doing well.”

“Y-yeah, you’re right. They told me before that I was getting in the way of their business, so I’m not sure if I’ll be welcome…”

“Even so, you should at least show your face. I know you probably can't bring back any souvenirs, but you can discuss that with Kiriko-chan. As for the rest, you can just stay at Tenchi's place, no need to feel awkward about it.”

At that moment, Airi noticed Hakuren and her team standing behind Seina, looking as if they wanted to say something. They really didn’t want to be separated from Seina, but on a planet with an early-stage civilization, there were some things they simply couldn’t help.

“Hmph… Everyone standing there go with Seina-kun. I’ll take care of managing the house here.”

“I-is that really okay!?” Hakuren and her team’s faces lit up instantly.

“Just like with Seina-kun, please make sure to go over the precautions and our cover story for Earth in detail with Kiriko-chan.”

“Thank you so much! Kiriko-sama, we look forward to working with you.” Hakuren and the girls bowed deeply to Kiriko with delighted expressions.

“And Seina-kun. I said you could take a break, but I’d like to ask Washu-sama, who’s on Earth, to check on Kamidake and Fuku-chan. There have been various issues, so I’d like her to investigate them thoroughly before we go into full operation.”

“Understood. Um, and what should I do about NB…?”

“Hmm, well… Since you can’t carry it around on Earth anyway, it’s probably safest to leave it here for now. I’ll have it help with some house maintenance.”

NB, the culmination of super science, would have to stay inside Kamidake anyway, even if they took it to Earth.

“Got it.”

“I’ll contact you again if anything comes up. Well then, everyone, have fun.” Airi vanished

after sending a meaningful wink to Kiriko and the rest.

At that moment, a small murmur arose among Kiriko and the girls as they realized what Airi was implying.

"……Seina-chan?"

Kiriko noticed Seina, who was alone, staring intently at the view of space on the bridge monitor, and approached him quietly.

"What's wrong?"

"Earth… It's been almost a year since then, hasn't it?" Seina murmured thoughtfully. "So much has happened..."

"Hehe. Yeah… a lot really has happened. But it's not just you, Seina-chan. You're going to be surprised when you get back to Earth."

"Huh? Wait, does that mean something happened at home?"

Seina couldn't help but jump to the worst-case scenario, but as if to dispel his anxiety, Kiriko gave him a beaming smile.

"That's a surprise you'll have to see for yourself."

"I-I see…"

Kiriko's smile gradually softened Seina's expression.

Come to think of it, he didn't have many good memories of Earth. When he first arrived at the Academy and Kiriko told him to go back to Earth, it had felt like returning to a prison. But having ventured out into the vast ocean of space, Seina had come to strongly realize that Earth was, after all, his home.

There were more painful and sad moments than happy ones, but there were happy memories too. Right now, all he could recall were the happy ones. Returning to Earth meant he would be able to see the people who had given him those happy memories.

"...I really want to go back to Earth soon." Seina's face was radiant, glowing with joy.

[Tenchi Muyo! GXP Volume 8: The End]

Afterword

Note: We recommend reading this Afterword Theater after the main text.

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Afterword Theater Part 5

“Well then, good luck, heh heh heh heh heh.”

The sound of Airi’s laughter that came through the receiver at the very end was like that of a drunken old man telling dirty jokes at a bar. But such things were trivial to Tsukiko right now. She had no time to worry about them.

(……Seina-chan is coming home.)

With trembling hands, Tsukiko slowly put down the receiver.

If it weren’t for Kuisu Panta, that news would have been joyful and heart-lifting. But now that Seina knew her true feelings, feelings she hadn’t yet sorted out, she had no idea what kind of face to put on when she saw him.

(And with Kiriko there too, it’s going to be incredibly awkward… Ha!)

With that, Tsukiko frantically looked around to check if anyone was there.

, Her ill-timed son, and the sharp-witted Sasami-chan.

Just thinking about what was to come, she was certain she’d end up making a complete fool of herself. To an outside observer, it must be quite a comical spectacle.

Trying not to think about it at all, Tsukiko hurried to her room and shut the sliding doors tight, bracing herself for the heat.

(Seina-chan is coming home!)

This was a place where no one could see her. Without thinking about anything else, Tsukiko first immersed herself in the joy of seeing Seina again. It wasn’t the joy of seeing an acquaintance, let alone a woman; it was the pure, simple joy of knowing Seina was safe and of being reunited with her. But…

“You idiot, Kuisu-sama!!”

Just as intense as that scream, an overwhelming wave of shame washed over Tsukiko. Her face flushed so red it felt like it might burst into flames, her legs went weak, and she collapsed to the floor like a puppet whose strings had snapped.

(I envy Kiriko.)

If she were Kiriko’s age and, in her position, she would have no problem acting on her feelings

without hesitation. But from her own perspective, Seina was still just a child. Memories from his childhood acted as a major brake on her feelings, and she wasn't even ready to step on the gas in the first place.

That conversation back then, where she urged Kiriko to send Seina back to Earth, made her realize an unexpected desire deep within herself, and Kuisu told that to Seina. It was exactly the mindset of an actress who had been thrust onto a packed stage without even knowing her lines.

(Should I just go through with it? Or should I run away?)

Tsukiko writhed in embarrassment so intense it brought tears to her eyes. Then, she noticed her reflection in the vanity mirror.

"Ah!"

She looked just like a teenage girl, and Tsukiko rushed over in a panic to cover herself with the cloth that had been draped over her. But then...

"... Oh no... I can't believe it."

Seeing herself on the verge of tears actually made her calm down.

—I don't find that look cute, nor do I think it's unbecoming for someone of that age.

—These are my true feelings.

She realized that.

"……Well then."

Having suddenly regained her composure, Tsukiko wiped away her tears and stood up straight.

"If Seina-chan ends up staying over, where should I have him sleep? The top candidate would be the guest house where Dai stays, but that would feel too formal at this point. Well, putting that aside, I'll just have to ask Dai not to stay here during that time. Kai isn't at an age where he misses his father anymore…"

To Kai, Dai was now nothing more than a wallet.

"It's annoying how he's trying to lure Kai with money to get him to talk about marriage. Besides, if he just holds out for a few more years, he'll be able to go to space on his own, this is the perfect opportunity. If he says he wants to stay, I'll just let him use a camping tent. He probably won't say 'I feel sorry for Dai' anymore, anyway."

She nodded with a cold look, in stark contrast to how she thought of Seina.

"That's fine for you, but where would be best for Seina-chan? Kai's room… Kiriko's room is still too soon… In that case…"

Tsukiko suddenly looked around her room. Perhaps there was a place where she could spend time with Seina. The overwhelming embarrassment she'd felt just moments ago was gone. And that didn't mean she'd given up.

After all, Seina and Tsukiko had about two thousand years left to live. At some point along that path, their paths would surely cross again.

"Hehe."

That vision of them together existed only in Tsukiko's heart for now, but basking in that modest happiness wasn't so bad, that's what Tsukiko thought.

The End

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Since this story, originally set at Galaxy Academy, seemed like the most natural way to link with the world of "True Tenchi Muyo", I decided to reveal a piece of the mystery that has long puzzled the Tenchi universe. Well, since I think this was pretty much what everyone expected, I didn't feel the need to drag it out too much.

With this volume, all the main characters are now assembled. Seina, who has been so preoccupied with his own issues until now, has grown accustomed to this world and is beginning to take an interest in various things. In that sense, the stage is finally set, so going forward, whenever I get the chance… or rather, whenever the opportunity arises, I'd like to continue revealing various mysteries in this way, framed as questions from Seina or the others.

Now, in the next volume, Seina will finally return to Earth. Naturally, it'll be a parade of things not covered in the anime! He'll visit his parents' home, Tenchi's house, the shrine, and Tsukiko's house, and a certain unexpected person will make an appearance, so please look forward to it.

Masaki Kajishima